

**CLASS CONFLICT IN ARAVINDADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER* AND  
JEETTHAYIL'S *NARCOPOLIS*: A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the concept of class conflict in two modern Indian English novels titled as *The White Tiger* by AravindAdiga and the *Narcopolis* by JeetThayil. Both novels demonstrate the great division between the rich and the poor brought about by the economic growth and urban development. Nevertheless, they are applying very different strategies as satirical realism and fragmented urban poetics narrative techniques which Adiga and Thayil employ respectively. *The White Tiger* is ambitious, violent and socially upwardly mobile, whereas *Narcopolis* is marginal lives which are left behind and forgotten. Through the comparative analysis of the works, the paper explores that the concepts of class conflict influence the life of individuals and mirror the truth about post independent India. This comparative study maintains that the issue of class conflict is not only at the heart of interpreting individual character drives, but also at asking greater questions of larger socio-economic standards in the present Indian society.*

**Key words:** *Class Conflict, realism, marginal group, Urban India, liberalization.*

**Introduction**

The rapid growth experienced by people after the economic liberalization did not favour a large number of people in the society. This development also increased the distance between the poor and the rich. This kind of fact has been addressed in literature, which has represented inequality, exploitation and frustration. Scholarshave often madecomment on the dynamics of classes formed in the globalization and neoliberal capitalism. The postcolonial literature, according to Aijaz Ahmad, tends to convey the perceived contradictions of uneven development (Ahmad 21). This concept is quite noticeable in *The White Tiger* and

*Narcopolis*. Although the two novels are based on the conflict of classes, they could be different in their approach to resistance and existence. These writings, put together, show that the conflict between classes in India is not only economic but also psychological and moral. Adiga creates a rebellion and uprising story, whereas Thayil displays silent sufferings of socially excluded people. The comparative analysis in this article answers the main questions like what are the narrative strategies they use to bring out systemic inequities. And what are the wider social and historical milieu portrayals in the context of modern India?

### Meaning of Class Conflict

Class conflict refers to clash or tension between the social classes within a society mainly between the upper classes and the working or lower classes. This disharmony is a result of wealth, as there is no equal distribution of power and opportunities. Within the conflict between classes, the upper class has the control of money, resources and power whereas the lower classes work hard and earn less salary, respect and safety. Consequently, the poor are being exploited, oppressed and the rich attempt to defend their power and privileges. According to Pierre Bourdieu, the class definition not only relies on the economic capital but also on the cultural and symbolic power. “By noticing that the difference is the source of social identity, he adds that difference is proclaimed against the nearest things”. (Bourdieu 170) Within the context of India, the intersectional category of class with caste, colonial history and global capitalism, establishes that Partha Chatterjee refers it as “a fractured modernity” (Chatterjee 38) where only some people get benefited.

In this paper, the Marxist theory is the most dominant mode of analyzing the nature of class conflict in *The White Tiger* and *Narcopolis*. According to Karl Marx, society is separated into classes depending on the wealth and the ability to possess resources. The working people continue to be involved in a constant clash with the ruling class. The rich classes acquire power by exploiting the working class (Marx & Engels 14). This concept shows why people in the masters and servants in *The White Tiger* are unequal and why the urban poor in *Narcopolis* are suffering. Marx also holds the argument that the economic state of affairs determines the life and decision of people. According to him, “the history of all the existing society is composed of the history of class struggle”. (1) This idea can be applied to examine the role of poverty, exploitation and labour that dictates the life of characters in the two novels.

Similarly, the postcolonial theory, which dwells upon the long term consequences of colonialism on society, is also used in the paper. According to Edward Said, colonialism establishes social orders and differences that continues even in the postindependent period (Said 7). This helps in interpreting the presence of the class and caste oppression in the

contemporary India. It is also used to comprehend marginalization in the city. According to Said, colonial rules silence a particular group of people and limits them to certain borders of the society (25). This concept applies both to *Narcopolis*, in which poor and addicted characters are not visible, and to *The White Tiger*, in which servants are not heard. Both, Marxist and postcolonial theories would enable to justify that, in both novels, the conflict of classes is not unintentional but based on economic inequality, injustice and social discrimination.

### **Class Conflict in *The White Tiger***

*The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga portrays a society that is sharply contrasted between the rich and the poor. It also represents the existence of a conflict between classes in the modern India. It shows how corruption in politics, caste hierarchy and economic disparity are combined to oppress the lower classes. The story revolves around the lives of Balram Halwai who was born in Darkness (as rural) to represent poverty and ignorance. The novel is structured in form of epistolary letters to the Chinese premier. Adiga presents the picture of class struggle as experience shaped by fear, exploitation and unfairness, through the character of Balram Halwai, a servant who is transformed into a businessman in Bangalore.

One of the most striking representations of class conflict in the novel is the metaphor of the Rooster Coop. Balram clarifies that poor servants remain trapped because they are conditioned to accept their oppression as “the greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop” (Adiga 147). The metaphor of Rooster Coop symbolizes a system where servants accept their suffering as normal. They do not rebel because their families depend on them. Adiga further states that “Servants have been trained to see themselves as inferior... they watch themselves being slaughtered and do not rebel” (149). This indicates that class conflict is not just external but also internal. The poor are mentally conditioned to accept inequality.

The discrimination in caste cannot be separated with the class conflicts in the novel. Being a Halwai, Balram is characterized by the caste system, which delimits his abilities. He notes in a harsh way that “a man born in the darkness cannot escape by his efforts” (70) implying that social freedom is almost impossible to those who were born poor. Even though India is described as a modernistic, democratic state, Adiga reveals the fact that caste and class still define the destiny of a person. The city areas also emphasize the economic inequality. In Delhi, Balram sees the extreme difference between the poor and the rich saying that “the roads are clean, but people are dirty”. (118) The rich people are living in the comfort of air conditioning, safe behind the barriers of power and money and the servants live under

open sky. This improper development exaggerates the level of conflict of the classes showing that economic growth only favors a few selected group.

Balram is of the opinion that only violence can help him to come out of this unfair system. The killing of Ashok turns out that “I had woken up that morning with the knowledge that I was going to kill a man”. (271) This action marks the point whereby Marx refers to the transition of the class struggle into a revolutionary instead of a passive one. Nevertheless, Adiga does not praise the achievement of Balram. Balram has confessed after turning into a businessman, “I am tomorrow”. (274) This quote implies that Balram gets involved in the same exploitative structure. In the novel, capitalism can be escaped, but it is impossible to do it without being immoral and equal to everyone. As a way of extreme reaction to the oppression of classes, his choice of murdering his master, Ashok, is a sign of the same. He defends his deed by says, “I’ll say it straight: I murdered him” (1) which makes his murder appear to be a case of self-liberation and not the blackest of all evils. Then later on he thinks that “to get out of Rooster Coop, you have to break the law”. (149) This part highlights the point made by Adiga about a system that moral principles fail under the influence of money, and existence requires violence.

Adiga, however, does not examine the success of Balram as a complete achievement. Balram also confesses that after becoming an entrepreneur, he has inherited the same exploitative nature as his previous masters. This is an indication that the class conflict does not vanish; they just transform under a capitalist order. According to critics, the novel reveals “the moral price of ascendancy mobility in neoliberal India”. (Nayar 182) Adiga discusses the role of poverty, caste and corruption in perpetuating inequality by using symbolism and subaltern voice and through satire. The novel also puts a reader to test whether one can be really free in such a system which lives on exploitation.

### **Class Conflict in *Narcopolis***

The novel *Narcopolis* by Jeet Thayil presents the factor of the conflict of classes because it concerns the individuals that live at the periphery of the Bombay/Mumbai society. In the novel, there is no discussion of the success and the progress of the society. Instead, it is an expression of how the downtrodden and deprived individuals live in poverty, addiction and misery. Thayil uses their lives to signify how big a gap that exists between the poor and the rich in modern India.

Bombay is a city that plays a big role to show the division of class. It is represented as a place where people have different classes, but people hardly talk about the poor. The narrator speaks about “the city that was alive, dying and dead at the same place”. (Thayil 3) This means that the poor are living in despair and underdeveloped as they do not have any

change in their lives. It also reveals the role of development in supporting the rich and dragging the poor into further darkness. One of the main problems of the novel is addiction to drugs. It is the symbol of anger and loneliness, social rejection and hopelessness. Dimple responds by saying that “we had died already, we were walking around and pretending”. (112) It is an illustration of invisibility due to class conflict. The poor are physically present and wiped off socially. The author continues by saying that “the poor are not brought to history. They vanish”. (216) It is eloquently illustrated on the fact that the marginalized people are left behind and their life does not feature in the national discourses of progress.

The novel is mostly concerned with addiction which is a way of harassment of poor classes. Drugs help such characters as Dimple and Rashid to forget about their painful reality. The life of Dimple helps to realize that there is the close connection between addiction and poverty. She believes that “the opium was the only god with whom she was acquainted”. (28) It is the addiction that only provides relief to the people who do not have social or economic status. The poor are treated as inferior to the rich, which is also one of the aspects that is revealed in the novel. Their lives are being disdained or destroyed without any hesitation. The author obviously mentions this inequality when he writes and says that “some lives were cheaper than others”, (112) which is the direct result of the class conflict, with the poor being less respected and not having any self-respect. As compared with *The White Tiger*, *Narcopolis* does not offer an opportunity of the rise. The characters have no fantasy of having plenty of money and being in power. Instead, they accept their misery as it is here to stay. The narrator claims that “we were already ruined before we began”, (187) which means that the identity of a class is predetermined and difficult to escape. The characters in *Narcopolis* are not hopeful of success such as Balram. They simply try to stay alive.

Though the novels are written in different styles and settings, they both reveal the fact that there is a conflict in the class in modern India. *The White Tiger* raises the class conflict when Balram struggles with the poverty and emerges a servant into a businessman signifies that you can find the solution to oppression but it will be at the cost of morality. Nevertheless, in *Narcopolis*, the class conflict is presented as pain that is silent and where poor and the marginalized characters are trapped in the world of poverty, drug addiction and careless living and of disparity of social liberty. However, Adiga revolves around revolt and ambition whereas Thayil revolves around absence and defeat. Both novels introduce the social inequality that is deep-rooted and question the presence of advancement in the contemporary India. They explain the impact of capitalism as making the winners and leaving the losers, but none of them can be easily resolved.

### **Observations**

The following observations are carried out by the study:

1. In both *The White Tiger* and *Narcopolis*, it is noticed that the gap between the poor and the rich in modern India is highly increased. The urbanization and economic growth has benefited the few elites at the expense of poor that are relegated to the fringes.
2. The classconflict causes the personal action and rebellion, as in *The White Tiger*. Balram interrogates the system to be set free and successful. On the contrary, *Narcopolis* does not show the active resistance; individuals are inactive and live in poverty and addiction.
3. *The White Tiger* studies that the inequality of classes is even more established through caste resulting in the absence of social freedom. In *Narcopolis*, caste is not that clear but it establishes social rejection and marginalization.
4. Mostly disparity is found in such cities as Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai. In the urban living, exploitation is also improved with the rich living well at the expense of poor who are struggling with survival.
5. The study shows that economic growth triggers upsurge in the degree of capitalist development. The method of success in *The Whites Tiger* is the moral compromise and in *Narcopolis*, it is the capitalist who kills the lives since it does not bother about the poor.

### **Conclusion**

Summing up it is clear that both novels have proved that the problem of the class conflict is a serious phenomenon in the modern Indian society. The difference between the poor and the rich is depicted in the both novels. *The White Tigertells* about a poor man can come out of the poverty as a result of fighting against the system, yet paying a high price and losing morality. *Narcopolis* states that poor citizens have no chance of escaping and in fact they are slowly murdered by apathy and poverty. In the novels, not all the people are always equal in terms of economic growth. They show that it is the class conflict that not only influences money and power, but also human dignity and identity. Both authors enable the readers to think of the real cost of social inequality and the actual development.

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