

Mapping Popular Culture and Everyday Life in the Matrix of Metropolitan/Cosmopolitan Identity: A Study of Adiga's novels

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Abstract

Popular Culture as a part of cultural theory and cultural studies is about culture that operates within a particular cultural context. This paper analyses the Indian popular culture in terms of their cultural context. In the age of globalization and passive consumption, as depicted by Aravind Adiga, popular culture belongs to the people and not the culture industry, it is generated from within, rather than imposed by a capitalist. Indian Popular culture through its three components- practice, theory and praxis-designates a dialectic unity and an agon which is interpreted as a 'counter hegemonic intellectual engagement. Aravind Adiga, by taking 'cultural populism' and simultaneously acknowledging the social, political and economic structures within which popular culture is produced, foregrounds the extent of agency in the act of consumption. The 'cultural populism' depicted in Adiga's novels privileges the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people over those of cultural elites and emphasizes their productivity and subversive potential. The process of consumption and culmination of popular culture is interpreted as a political act which permeates all aspect of everyday life.

Key words: popular culture, consumption, glocal, cosmopolitan, praxis

The Indian popular culture has been dominated by a focus on historical origins of nation-state and its political turmoil. However, the aura of popular culture is so powerful, when combined with regional and national identity that the concept of nation proves to be “an imaginative

field on to which different sets of concerns may be projected, and upon which connections may be forged between different aspects of social, political and cultural experience (Cubitt; 1998:1)". This paper will focus on how Arvind Adiga portrays the Indian popular culture in miniature form that takes place in metropolitan cum cosmopolitan cities of Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai and so on. In depicting Indian popular culture the crucial question which arises from the satirical novels of Adiga is, how a nation and region is represented and experienced through popular culture and everyday life? The answer provided in Adiga's *White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* is that a consumer society gives various new forms to popular culture like prostitution, linguistic terminologies, narco-culture, theology, capitalism vs. communism and so on. In a society, as per traditional conventions, pre-eminent elements of identity are citizenship, national integration and nation-state. Despite the globalization of economies, cultures and social processes, portrayed by Adiga in his novels at regional level the crux of identity is deeply rooted in national space; the space in which culture and everyday life operates and becomes quintessential to the nation. This is shown in *Last Man in Tower*, while describing *Vishram* society of Bombay:

Vishram is a building like the people living in it, middle class to its core. Improvement or failure, it is incapable of either extremity. The men have modest paunches, wear checked polyster shirts over white banians, and keep their hair oiled and short. The older woman wear saris, salwar kammez, or skirts, and the younger ones wear jeans. All of them pay taxes, support charities, and vote in local and general elections. Just one glance at Vishram in the evening, as its residents sit in white plastic chairs in the compound, chit-chatting, fanning themselves with the *Times of India*, and you know that this society is – what else? – pucca. (Adiga, 9)

The question which makes one ponder is, how different forms of this popular culture (re)produced and experienced in contemporary world? According to Guibernau, the "nation represents the socio-historical context within which Adiga's novels Indian popular culture forms are suited to carry the imperatives of everyday life. *White Tiger* and *Last man in Tower* shows the transformation of economic, social and cultural life in which bodies of knowledge and thought are unstable, implodes into a challenge forming new adaptations with cosmopolitan cum urban development which are controlled and manipulated by individuals and institutions. Adiga's novel acts a source of mass (popular) culture critique where questions is raised about who is cast out of the national culture? How are ethnicity, religion, language and region accommodated by the state? Who is marginalized or rejected as hindrance to progress and development of national culture? While answering these questions Adiga's seems to indicate that people tend to, passively, accept knowledge and identities, and are influenced by the elite/bourgeoisie national cultural organizations. In all this, the struggle for inclusion in which the unacknowledged legislators or 'cultural guardians' cannot always control. The low cultures are referred to as 'wild' cultures, local, spontaneous and non-reflexive. The rise of popular forms of entertainment, rituals and conventions, political organizations and a host of vernacular events is not produced by national elites, but is facilitated by the middle class. Although Adiga portrays the urban landscapes of 1970's and 80's his work have historical salience, which runs along the lines with contemporary world,

where a cultural elite propagating ‘high culture’ is one of the aspects of the production of national identity. In fact, the popular culture ignored by these cultural elites has been reprised by Adiga as ‘repressed knowledge’ and has been reconstructed as part of alternative kinds of national/regional identity. Adiga passes a message through these novels that in the consumerist society of metropolitan cum cosmopolitan cities ‘national consciousness’ of undeveloped countries like India and many more in line is affected by intellectual laziness of the national middle class; the cosmopolitan mindset which clings to a capitalist society formulating various sub-cultures which takes the form of narcissism substituting humanity for progress and development i.e. the national middle class dreams of becoming elites, and this cosmopolitan outlook is described in the beginning of *Last Man in Tower*:

Outside, parked along the compound wall are a dozen scooters and motorbikes, three Maruti-Suzukis, two Tata Indicas, a battered Toyota Qualis, and few children bicycles. The main feature of this compound is a three-foot-tall polished black-stone cross, set inside a shrine of glazed blue-and-white tiles and covered in fading flowers and wreaths – a reminder that the building was originally meant for Roman Catholics. Hindus were admitted in the late 1960s and in 1980s the better kind of muslim – Bohra, Ismaili, college-educated. Vishram is now entirely ‘cosmopolitan’ (i.e. ethically and religiously mixed). (Adiga, 5)

This mainly consist of merchant class which makes up the most enlightened section of the nation-state, and are small in number, engaged in business and liberal profession. Adiga in his novels shows how ‘globalization’ acts as an invisible agent and a catalyst. In this context, globalization constitutes, what Arjun Appadurai calls “a complex overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models.” For Homi Bhabha, the globalization of social spaces mirrors a predicament of ‘unsatisfaction’ that triggers the communion and promulgation of “a global or transnational imaginary and its cosmopolitan subjectivities”. The discourse of globalization propounds a ‘rhetoric of newness’ which shows that Indian popular Culture has acquired a transnational character within and outside the country – food, music, religion, diversity, rituals and rapid change – are responsible for shaping metropolitan cum cosmopolitan, or in words of a postmodernist, a ‘rhizomatic’ identity where tracing the roots becomes challenging and can often take the shape of resistance to the change and development. Though Arvind Adiga is settled in Australia and continues to write about India and contributing to the field of ‘Indian writing in English’ the question which grabs the reader’s attention is that, the world continues to strife between a wedge of ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’. This is evident and clearly deciphered in Arvind Adiga’s fictions. It is through the value system in his novels that one comes to know about the amalgamation of sociological and anthropological categories with other elements like locality, region, territory, history, myths, heroes, modernity and industrialism which helps one explore and analyze the categories in relation to contemporary culture which triggers the creation and dissemination of new meanings. For instance, the value system depicted in Adiga’s fictions justifies and legitimizes the prevailing division of labor which includes occupation, life-style, way of life, economic interest and so on. Thus, the process of socialization socializes people to participate and play different roles in the

system, which is a core phenomenon of the dynamics of social systems. In social and political terms, though the process of globalization stimulates new understanding of identity and community, promotes new forms of governance; but it clouds our conceptions which does not suggest that nation is society.

Since Indian writing in English is preoccupied mainly with social, economic and political issues of society(nation-region), and Adiga's works is also preoccupied with the same; but in Adiga's works readers see 'transculturalism' which can be defined as "seeing oneself in the other" i.e. combining elements of more than one culture, giving a new dimension to Indian popular culture. It is transcultural elements which give recognizance to the instability within Indian popular culture, discourses and meaning making process. It suggests further that the epistemological and the political intensification of the concept of 'pluralism' or 'difference', to some extent limits the heuristic and ideological possibility of cultural propinquity i.e. the 'community' may be optimistic in nature or oppressive, depending upon conditions of discursive deployment, as in *Last Man in the Tower*, but the assertion: "Nothing can stop a living thing that wants to be free", offers a resistance to capitalist domination. In cultural studies, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been associated with contemporary diasporic communities; but with Adiga, in addition, the concept of 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' commemorate a way of knowing based on everyday experience in a metropolitan cities like Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad and so on.

In *White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* consumption interpenetrates all aspects—anthropology, political science, communications, psychology, sociology, art and literature, media studies, history and geography— of life in societies has becomes one of the main proponents in commercialization of Indian popular culture, thereby acting as a resource for mass identity construction and maintenance; and in Adiga's fiction consumption has been rendered as social and political act. One gets a glimpse of 'commodity culture' in Adiga's fictional world where people comprehend themselves and the world in terms of commodities. The capitalist society shown in the novels treats labor as commodity, which can be exchanged in labor market. According to Theodor Adorno, the "commodity itself in consumer society has become image representation, spectacle. Use value has been replaced by packaging and advertising" (Mikula, 28). The Indian popular culture is also inter-textual in nature, and in *Last Man in Tower* there is reference to the popularity of murder mysteries:

For his retirement, Masterji had hoped to re-read his collection of murder mysteries, and history books of old Rome (Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*; Tacitus, *The Annals*; Plutarch, *Illustrious Figures of Roman Republic*) and old Bombay (*A Brief Life of Mountstuart Elphinstone; The Stages of the Creation of the City of Bombay, fully illustrated*)... Mrs. Puri claimed one of the last Agatha Christies from the book-shelf and smiled – there were a few Erle Stanley Gardners too, but she was not that bored. (Adiga, 29)

The everyday experience helps to study the 'micro-sociology' of a community belonging to metro cum cosmopolitan area. The concept of everyday is mainly a theoretical concept associated with popular culture and its practicality in real life. French Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre emphasized on changing the social and cultural conditions of everyday life in

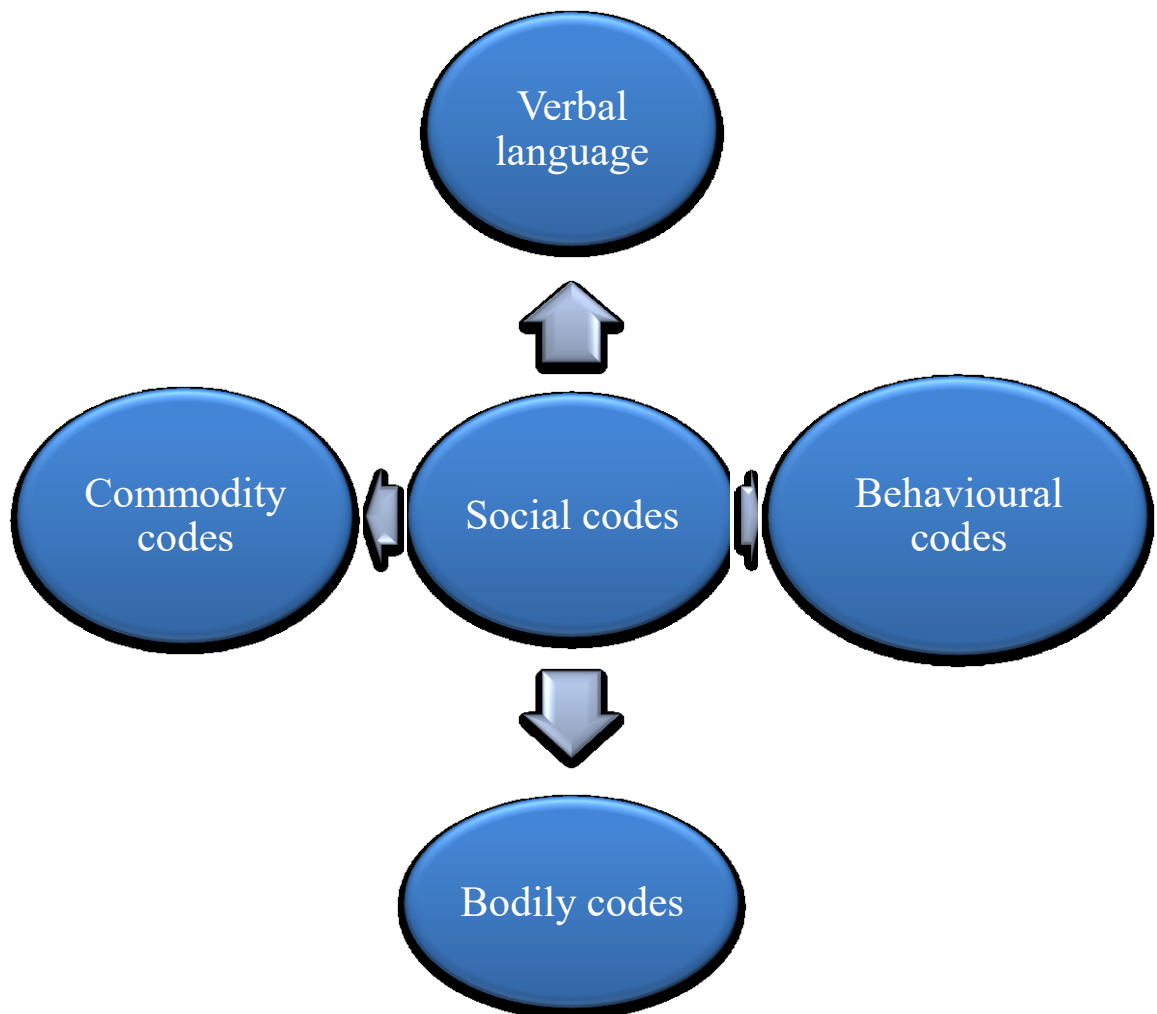
order to get rid of alienation; and Adiga has brought to our attention that separation of work, household and pleasure activities, operational under capitalism results in commodification and alienating daily life.

Adiga's metropolitan cum cosmopolitan fiction deals with the physical features, people, customs and traditions, habits, manners, language and so on of a particular area. It reveals the particular locality, its uniqueness, its specialties and drawbacks, its topography and the distinctive spirit of that particular region. Everywhere the problem of humanism arises and there is a conflict or polarization of forces which results in confrontation and bitterness. As a matter of fact, Adiga starts with a region/city and rises above the particular and touches the universal. In the very description of Bombay, in *Last Man in Tower* it is evident:

What is Bombay?

From the thirteenth floor, a window answers: banyan, maidan, stone, tile tower, dome, sea, hawk, amaltas in bloom, smog on the horizon, gothic phantasmagoria (Victorian Terminus and Municipal Building) emerging from the smog. (Adiga, 51)

Thus, the urban landscapes selected in Adiga's fictions become a symbol of world at large, microcosm which reflects the great world beyond. For the predecessors of globalization, like Dharmen Shah, the world is a consumer chain, with a creative space and focus on 'free market'. Globaliser like Shah believes in export of a life-style, mono-acculturation, standardization and homogeneity that makes the world accessible i.e. controlled and manipulated. Adiga conveys that popular culture belongs to the people, not to the culture industry. In the context of everyday life, popular culture is ephemeral and is "mapped onto the routines of everyday life" (Fiske, 65). To borrow Daniel Chandler's codes, the popular culture in Adiga's novel takes the forms of social codes which can be illustrated by the following diagram:



The above illustration serves how Adiga has mapped popular culture and everyday life in terms of social or epistemological knowledge i.e. matrix of metropolitan/cosmopolitan identity. These “spatialized subjectivities” are often used to describe the processes leading to identity formation; and, cities have played a crucial part in the formation of such identities. The socio-spatial dialectic at work here. For instance, an area of a city – Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, and Ahmadabad – may serve as a social setting in which particular cultural values can be expressed; on the other hand, the neighborhood (*Vishram* society) can serve to form and shape those distinctive cultural (middle class) values. However, it is crucial to remember, that in Adiga’s novels the cultures of the city do not emerge in these spaces in isolation. Not only are they defined in relation to cultures in other areas but they also involve a hybrid mixing of various elements from elsewhere. Urban spaces are created by people, and they

draw their character from the people that inhabit them. As people live and work in urban spaces, they gradually adapt to their environment to suit their needs and express their values. There is thus a continuous two-way process, a 'socio-spatial dialectic' (Soja, 1980), in which people create and modify urban

Spaces while at the same time being conditioned in various ways by the spaces in which they live and work. Neighborhoods and communities are created, maintained and modified; the values, attitudes and behavior of their inhabitants are influenced by their surroundings and by the values, attitudes and behavior of the people around them. Simultaneously, the characters in Adiga's fictions are engaged in an ongoing process of urbanization, which triggers a change in economic, demographic, social and cultural forces that are continuously interacting with the urban spaces. With reference to Beck's (2002) work, what Beck calls 'cosmopolitan sociology' is well placed than 'national sociology' to interpret and strive to bring change in the lives of people in the global community as, not only is it characterized by a 'dialogic imagination', but it is also able to deal at local level – or as Beck would like to say, 'glocal' – with the day-to-day experiences of 'internal globalization, globalization from within (neocolonialism) national societies' (Blackshaw, 85). Thus, critical cosmopolitanism is crucial in informing us about the lived conditions of globalization processes from within local communities rather than merely describing them from outside.

Approaching the popular cultural praxis and commodities of the societal life, Adiga's novels aptly showcase the diverse spatial and temporal scales of violence and perpetual flow of exploitation and relegation of the people from the lower strata of the society in everyday life. In the realm of a cosmopolitan/metropolitan culture, the resistance to the dominant socio-political and cultural ideologies and the prevalent hegemonic social structure permeate the very texture of Adiga's novels as one of the dominant motif of the work. There are two modalities of ideological, resistance, reverberated from his works, i.e. an individualistic approach, constricted in a very smaller groove and mass led insurrections which to a greater extent endeavor to unveil the fissures in the existing power structure and to overtone it so that to bring out alternate forms of traditions and new forms of power and property relation. Aravind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) the Booker Prize Novel, divulges an common individual Balram Halwai's response, his indignation, his ideological and intermittent attempt to resist the cultural, socio-political hegemonies and the homogenization of nation and nationhood in a cosmopolitan/metropolitan setting which finally ends in the assassination of his master.

In *White Tiger*, Adiga challenges Indian culture to recreate a society in which Individuals are truly free. Individual cultural reason becomes the epitome of a narrative structure of a cosmopolitan society's identity. In the novel the individual, the narrator, Balram Halwai, becomes something in India as well as global domain under the symbolic pseudonym of The White Tiger, as he pleads his agenda to China and United States of world economics. The narrator, also a murderer is not excusable but the way Adiga presents him through certain attached nuances, it becomes a heroic story. Jacques Derrida's concept 'Difference', can be looked upon here as a medium to notify the individual identity formation. Derrida's play on the French *Differer*, meaning both 'to differ' and 'to defer' allows for a link in 'signifying

nonidentity' and 'the order of the same'. Difference with an 'a' becomes a philosophy rather than a simple word. The neologism 'indicates the middle voice', there by asking the reader to allow dissonant suspensions of known truths defined by societies. Individuals' free will is not just an action here, but a state of being and the ability to change what one's being is defined as. Non-identity becomes a form of empowerment.

Adiga as a writer of cultural ideology and customs, has carved a niche for himself in the domain of Indian popular culture. Inserting the contemporary everyday issues, events of metropolitan approach, Adiga redefines Indian identity and individuality. In the novel *The White Tiger*, Adiga frames a sphere of individuality of cultural praxis and forces, in form of the character Balram Halwai. The protagonist calls himself 'half-baked', like many others in the country and is not allowed to finish school, even though his smartness is recognized by the school inspector, who gives him a name 'the white tiger' 'the rarest of animals'-the creature that comes along only once in a generation(Adiga,35). In Adiga's writing, the voice of Balram seems to be a new India and in the novel it has been presented in a quick-witted, half-baked, and self-mocking manner. A lot to acclaim in this novel, it is a witty tale of India's changing society and it makes readers ponder. As a story of middle class India, the novel, makes a thorough comparison of class suppressiveness which becomes the talk of the writing. Individual identity turns into cosmopolitan/metropolitan identity, where the evicted and the advantaged are not steeped in the pigeonhole of struggle and domination. As a social commentary, the novel is an aggressive piece of work, stripping away the facade of 'India Rising' or 'feel good' factor. Adiga draws a margin of split truth between the haves and have-nots, the way the servant class is treated and the life of the poor. As he says:

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench – the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country (Adiga, 173-174).

Through Balram Halwai's character Adiga takes the readers to two worlds of cultural identity in the metropolitan city, Bangalore. One is, 'an India of Light', and another 'an India of Darkness'. The writer questions, the country India- 'an India is permanently teased by – why can't we be like China?'. In the façade of globalization and modernization, Adiga proves the necessity to write such a novel; where nothing is simple, everything is contested, and life or death struggles are an everyday occurrence. But towards the end of the novel, both 'nothing' and 'everything' are played against each other, like the paradox in an *Enso*: the narrator states, "The difference is everything, in reference to the way he can now 'complain about

everything' as a 'rich' man(Adiga,266). Another point is the narrator's cultural approach, adventures in the big city are really praiseworthy. Through, Balram's character Adiga attributes a thought of subaltern identity, and this can be a positive answer to the question raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak- *Can the Subaltern Speak?* 'Balram being a Halwai, is a lower caste as far the Indian culture and society are concerned, becomes a rich man in a metropolitan society; where culture serves as a social setting of identity formation. And this identity formation is binary for Balram. He both accepts and challenges the change in the society. As he says. 'Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave' (Adiga, 41). Such instances cement Adiga's views and argument in the novel, as a product of popular culture.

A postcolonial reading of Adiga's novel reveals the symptoms of both colonial and neocolonial practices. Both in *The Last Man in Tower* and *The White Tiger* certain symptoms can be looked upon as a tool to promote the ideology of imperialism, exploitation of the weak, the poor, of natural resources and the continued subordination of certain sections of the society. And this machinery leads to the instabilities in the systems-both social and political. Adiga's novels mark these traits as a popular cultural ideologies and becoming the monuments of historiography of culture and society that mark the changing faces of world orders.

As Alan Wong says, 'All Great Changes are preceded by Chaos'. Hence the new Indian popular cultural identity through the novels of Aravind Adiga is the reason of a great change in the everyday life of many individual's in the matrix of metropolitan/cosmopolitan identity. There might be inferences in contrast of Adiga's way of presenting Indian popular cultural identity in his writings; as a motif of selling the consumerist India to the western world, or, as conveying the message that with rural India shining, India will automatically shine and really emerge in light. But how far he has succeeded it is for the readers and critics to judge; when seen from the sociological point of view one can perceive that Adiga has given shape to Indian popular culture from the following equation.

Indian Popular Culture \Longrightarrow Consumerist Mass Society \Longrightarrow Mass Deception

Towards the end it can be concluded that Aravind Adiga conveys a message in a satirical manner – life is an illusion – and this is what T.S Eliot says: 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality'.

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