

Research Article

Capitalist Modernity, Ideological Control and Subaltern Resistance in Aravind Adiga's Fiction

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Abstract: Aravind Adiga's fiction presents a critical picture of contemporary Indian society shaped by capitalist modernity, widening economic inequalities, and deep-rooted class divisions. This paper examines how capitalist systems operate as powerful ideological forces in Adiga's select novels and short stories, and how subaltern characters respond to these forces through various forms of resistance. Using a Marxist critical framework, the study explores key concepts such as ideology, hegemony, class domination, and resistance to understand the social realities represented in Adiga's fiction. The paper argues that capitalist modernity in Adiga's works is not merely an economic condition but an ideological structure that controls people's thoughts, desires, and aspirations. By analysing select texts within a Marxist perspective, this paper highlights how Adiga's fiction exposes the hidden power of capitalist ideology and brings attention to the struggles of subaltern groups in modern India.

Keywords: Capitalist modernist; Ideological control; Marxist criticism; Subaltern resistance; Class inequality

Introduction

Aravind Adiga has emerged as one of the most influential voices in contemporary Indian English literature because of his bold and honest representation of social inequality and economic injustice in modern India. His writings move away from idealised or glamorous portrayals of the nation and instead focus on the problematic lives of ordinary people, often marginalised. Servants, drivers, daily-wage labourers, small clerks, and struggling middle-class individuals constitute the centre of his fictional world. Through their stories, Adiga brings attention to the hidden realities of a society that celebrates economic growth while overlooking human suffering.

In novels such as *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*, as well as in the short stories collected in *Between the Assassinations*, Adiga exposes the darker side of India's transformation into a global economic power. These works challenge the popular image of India as a land of opportunity by revealing deep inequalities beneath the surface. While economic development has created wealth for a small section of society, many others remain trapped in poverty, insecurity, and exploitation. Adiga's fiction makes it clear that progress is not shared equally and that the benefits of growth often come at the cost of dignity and justice for people experiencing poverty. The economic liberalisation that began in India in the 1990s plays an important role in shaping the world depicted in Adiga's fiction. Liberalisation introduced market-driven policies, privatisation, and a strong emphasis on consumer culture. These changes were expected to improve living standards, employment opportunities, and social mobility. However, Adiga shows that this promise remains unfulfilled mainly for the majority of the population. Instead of reducing inequality, capitalist expansion has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. His fiction reveals how wealth and power become concentrated in the hands of a few, while the marginalised continue to struggle for basic survival.

Adiga's portrayal of capitalist modernity goes beyond economics. In his works, capitalism functions as a powerful ideological force that shapes how people think, behave, and dream. Individuals are encouraged to believe that success is possible through hard work and determination. However, the social system denies equal opportunities to everyone. People with low incomes are told to dream big, but they are trapped in conditions that make such dreams impossible to achieve. This creates a sense of frustration and helplessness, as people blame themselves for their failure rather than questioning the system that restricts them. Institutions play a crucial role in maintaining this ideological control in Adiga's fiction. Education, often seen as a path to empowerment, fails to provide substantive freedom to marginalised groups. Instead of encouraging critical thinking, it teaches obedience and discipline. Bureaucratic systems appear corrupt and indifferent, making it difficult for ordinary people to seek justice or improve their situation. Media and popular culture celebrate wealth, success, and consumerism while ignoring the struggles of people living in poverty. The market turns human value into monetary value, reducing individuals to their economic worth. Together, these institutions normalise inequality and make exploitation appear natural and unavoidable.

This representation of society closely reflects Marxist ideas of ideology and hegemony. According to Marxist thought, domination is not maintained only through force but also through control over ideas and beliefs. People are made to accept their suffering as part of the natural order of life. In Adiga's fiction, subaltern characters often internalise this belief and accept their position without protest. They fear punishment, social exclusion, or further hardship if they resist. As a result, capitalist domination continues with little open opposition. Despite this strong ideological control, Adiga's fiction also presents moments of resistance. His characters are not entirely unaware of the injustice they face. Over time, many of them begin to recognise the exploitation and inequality around them. However, this awareness rarely leads to collective or organised resistance. Instead, resistance appears in individual and fragmented forms. Some characters choose silence, some withdraw emotionally, and others resort to morally questionable actions, including violence. These acts reflect their frustration and desire to escape oppression, even if the consequences are uncertain.

This paper uses a Marxist critical framework to explore how ideological control operates in Adiga's fiction and how subaltern characters respond to it. The analysis suggests that while Adiga highlights resistance, he also shows its limitations. The social and economic conditions created by capitalist modernity prevent marginalised individuals from forming collective movements. Their resistance remains personal and morally complex rather than revolutionary. This portrayal emphasises the strength of ideological control in modern capitalist societies. Through his focus on marginalised lives, Aravind Adiga makes a significant contribution to contemporary literature. His fiction challenges dominant narratives of development and success and forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality and injustice. By foregrounding the experiences of the subaltern, Adiga exposes the human cost of capitalist growth and questions the moral values of modern India. His works serve as powerful reminders that actual progress cannot be measured only in economic terms but must also consider social justice, dignity, and human well-being.

Theoretical Framework: Marxism, Ideology, and Hegemony

Marxist literary criticism offers a valuable and practical approach for understanding the social and economic issues that appear in Aravind Adiga's fiction. This critical method focuses on class relations, power structures, and how economic systems influence human lives and cultural expressions. According to Karl Marx, a capitalist society is divided into social classes based on ownership of resources and the means of production. Those who own wealth and control economic power form the ruling class, while those who depend on selling their labour for survival belong to the working class. This unequal structure leads to exploitation, as the working class's labour benefits the ruling class. Marx also argues that economic systems shape not only material conditions but also social relationships, cultural practices, and ways of thinking.

A central concept in Marxist theory is ideology. Ideology refers to a set of beliefs and ideas that support the interests of the dominant class by making inequality appear normal, natural, or unavoidable. In capitalist societies, people are often encouraged to

believe that success depends solely on individual effort, while failure is seen as a personal weakness. Marx describes this condition as false consciousness, in which the oppressed are unable to fully recognise the systems that exploit them. Instead of questioning inequality, they accept it as part of everyday life. In Adiga's fiction, this idea is clearly visible. Many of his marginalised characters accept their suffering without protest because they believe they deserve their position or that nothing can be changed.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony further helps explain how capitalist power is maintained. Hegemony refers to a form of control where the ruling class dominates not through force but by gaining the consent of the oppressed. This consent is created through culture, education, social values, and everyday practices. Ideas such as hard work, loyalty, discipline, and obedience are promoted as moral virtues, even when they benefit only the powerful. Adiga's characters often adhere to these values, even when such adherence leads to exploitation. This shows how deeply capitalist ideology shapes ordinary people's thinking and prevents them from questioning injustice.

Another important Marxist thinker, Louis Althusser, explains how ideology works through institutions, which he calls Ideological State Apparatuses. These include schools, religious organisations, the media, government offices, and the legal system. According to Althusser, these institutions shape individuals' beliefs and behaviours in ways that sustain capitalist systems. They teach people how to behave, what to believe, and what to accept as usual. In Adiga's fiction, such institutions often fail to support the marginalised. Education does not offer absolute freedom; bureaucracy creates barriers rather than solutions; and the media promotes success stories while ignoring poverty. Through these portrayals, Adiga shows how institutions limit the choices available to the subaltern. Within this Marxist framework, the idea of subaltern resistance becomes complex. Subaltern individuals may gradually become aware of their exploitation, but social and economic conditions often prevent them from organising collective resistance. Fear, poverty, dependence, and isolation make it difficult for them to challenge robust systems. As a result, resistance in Adiga's fiction rarely appears in the form of large-scale movements or revolutions. Instead, it is expressed in small, personal, and sometimes morally uncertain ways. Characters may resist through silence, withdrawal, anger, or even violence.

Adiga's fiction captures the tension between awareness and limitation. His characters begin to see the injustice around them, yet they struggle to escape it. This incomplete resistance highlights the strength of ideological control in capitalist societies. By presenting resistance as fragmented and individual rather than heroic or revolutionary, Adiga offers a realistic portrayal of subaltern life under capitalism. His works suggest that awareness alone is not enough to challenge deeply rooted systems of power. Structural change requires collective action, which remains difficult under conditions of inequality and ideological domination. Through this Marxist lens, Adiga's fiction can be read as a powerful critique of capitalist society and its impact on marginalised communities. His stories reveal how ideology, institutions, and economic structures work together to maintain inequality while limiting the possibilities of

resistance. This theoretical framework helps readers understand the deeper social meanings embedded in his narratives and highlights his role as a writer committed to exposing injustice in contemporary India.

Capitalist Modernity and Class Inequality in Adiga's Fictions

Capitalist modernity plays a central role in shaping the world of Aravind Adiga's fiction, particularly with respect to class inequality. His works present a society deeply divided between those who hold power and wealth and those who struggle to survive at the margins. While economic growth and development are often celebrated as signs of progress, Adiga reveals that these benefits reach only a small section of society. For the majority, daily life continues to be marked by poverty, insecurity, and limited opportunities. Through his stories, Adiga challenges the idea that capitalism automatically leads to social improvement for everyone. Capitalist modernity promises opportunity, yet Adiga's characters confront rigid social barriers. Balram himself notes that the poor **"dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich"** (Adiga, *The White Tiger*), highlighting the unbalanced distribution of wealth and aspiration. Even as characters aspire to escape poverty, many find themselves confined by circumstance and societal prejudice.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga presents a striking image of inequality by dividing India into two symbolic spaces: the "Light" and the "Darkness." The "Light" represents urban centres where wealth, comfort, and opportunity are concentrated. In contrast, the "Darkness" stands for rural areas and poor communities that remain neglected and invisible. This division highlights the uneven distribution of power and resources in capitalist India. Although the system claims to offer social mobility, Adiga shows that rigid class barriers prevent most people from improving their lives. The promise of success exists mainly as an illusion that hides more profound structural inequality.

Last Man in Tower explores a different aspect of capitalist modernity by focusing on the urban middle class. The novel centres on residents of an old apartment building who face pressure from real estate developers eager to profit from rising property values. These developers represent the new capitalist elite, driven by greed and profit rather than concern for human relationships. As the residents are forced to choose between money and their homes, the novel exposes how capitalist values weaken social bonds and prioritise financial gain over dignity, memory, and community.

The short stories in *Between the Assassinations* further expand Adiga's critique by portraying the everyday struggles of residents of a small town undergoing economic change. Characters such as labourers, shopkeepers, and clerks face exploitation, humiliation, and uncertainty in their daily lives. Through these simple yet powerful narratives, Adiga shows that inequality under capitalism is not only about income or wealth. It is also about power, respect, and the ability to live with dignity. Together, these works reveal how capitalist modernity deepens social divisions and reinforces class inequality in contemporary India.

Ideological Control and Institutional Power

One of the most important aspects of Adiga's fiction is his portrayal of ideological control. Capitalism survives not only through economic exploitation but also through institutions that shape people's beliefs and desires.

1. Education

In Aravind Adiga's fiction, education is often shown as an institution that does not truly help the poor rise out of their difficult social conditions. Instead of encouraging independent thinking or providing meaningful knowledge, education mainly trains individuals to obey authority and accept their place in society. Adiga suggests that schooling, rather than serving as a tool for empowerment, often prepares marginalised people for low-wage service roles within the existing social order.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram's experience with education clearly reflects this problem. His schooling is limited, poorly resourced, and focused more on discipline than learning. Teachers demand obedience, while real knowledge remains out of reach for students like Balram. As a result, education fails to open new opportunities for him and instead reinforces his sense of inferiority. Rather than questioning social inequality, Balram is taught to accept it as usual. This kind of education does not challenge injustice; it quietly supports it. Adiga's portrayal of education connects closely with Louis Althusser's idea of education as an Ideological State Apparatus. According to Althusser, institutions such as schools play a key role in maintaining existing class structures by shaping how individuals think and behave. In Adiga's fiction, schools help reproduce social inequality by ensuring that people experiencing poverty remain trained for submission while the privileged gain access to absolute power and knowledge. Through this critical depiction, Adiga exposes the failure of education in a capitalist society that claims to offer equal opportunity. His fiction reveals how education, rather than breaking class barriers, often reinforces them, leaving the poor trapped in cycles of obedience and limited choice.

2. Bureaucracy

In Aravind Adiga's fiction, bureaucracy is portrayed as a system that fails low-income individuals and instead serves those with money and power. Government offices, which are supposed to provide justice and support, often become places of harassment and exploitation for ordinary people. People with low incomes are made to wait endlessly, treated with disrespect, and forced to pay bribes even for basic services. Through these portrayals, Adiga highlights how bureaucracy deepens social inequality rather than reducing it. For marginalised characters, interactions with government institutions are often painful and frustrating. Officials misuse their authority and create unnecessary obstacles, knowing that poor people have little choice but to submit. Justice is delayed or denied, not because of the law, but because of corruption and indifference. This constant exploitation makes people with low incomes feel powerless and invisible within the system.

As a result, subaltern characters in Adiga's fiction gradually lose trust in institutions that are meant to protect their rights. The state appears distant and

uncaring, reinforcing the belief that the system is not designed for people like them. Instead of seeing bureaucracy as a source of support, they begin to view it as an enemy that cannot be questioned or resisted. Adiga's depiction of bureaucracy shows how institutional corruption discourages collective resistance. When people believe that every office is corrupt and every official can be bought, hope for justice disappears. This loss of faith pushes the marginalised further into silence, fear, and resignation. Through these narratives, Adiga exposes how bureaucratic systems maintain control by keeping the poor dependent, discouraged, and excluded from meaningful participation in society.

3. Media and Market

In Aravind Adiga's fiction, the media and the market play a decisive role in shaping how people understand success, failure, and social value. Advertisements, television programs, and news stories constantly celebrate wealth, luxury, and personal achievement. At the same time, they rarely show the suffering of the poor or the harsh realities faced by marginalised communities. This selective representation creates the impression that economic success is easily attainable for anyone who works hard enough. At the same time, poverty is seen as an individual weakness rather than the result of deeper social and economic problems. Adiga reveals how this focus on consumerism hides the unequal structures of capitalist society. By glorifying affluent lifestyles and success stories, the media distracts people from questioning injustice and exploitation. Those who struggle are made to feel ashamed of their condition, believing that their poverty is a personal failure. As a result, the voices of the marginalised remain unheard, and their experiences are pushed to the margins of public attention. Through such portrayals, Adiga shows how capitalist ideology gains acceptance without coercion. People begin to accept exploitation because they believe their suffering is temporary or necessary for future success. This belief weakens resistance and encourages patience instead of protest. Adiga's fiction exposes this form of ideological control by highlighting the gap between the glamorous image of progress and the lived reality of inequality. By uncovering these contradictions, Adiga challenges dominant narratives promoted by media and markets. His works encourage readers to look beyond surface-level success stories and recognise the hidden systems that silence marginalised voices and normalise injustice in contemporary society.

Subaltern Consciousness and Individual Resistance in *The White Tiger*

The White Tiger offers a striking portrayal of subaltern resistance in Aravind Adiga's fiction, particularly through the character of Balram Halwai. At the beginning of the novel, Balram is a submissive and obedient servant who believes that loyalty and compliance are his only means of survival. He accepts the social hierarchy and regards his position at the bottom of society as natural. However, as he encounters the everyday injustices of the wealthy and powerful, Balram begins to recognise the cruelty, corruption, and hypocrisy embedded within the capitalist system. These experiences gradually awaken his awareness of class exploitation and social inequality.

Balram's realisation of the oppressive structures around him is symbolised by his description of the "rooster coop," a metaphor for how servants and low-income individuals are trapped by fear, tradition, and loyalty. He sees that most people accept their subordinate position because the system conditions them to remain obedient, while any attempt to escape is punished. This growing awareness marks the emergence of class consciousness, in which Balram begins to understand the social forces that constrain his freedom. Unlike collective resistance, however, Balram's awakening is personal and isolated. He is aware of the injustice, but there is no organised movement or solidarity among the oppressed to challenge it.

Balram's eventual act of murdering his master is morally complex, yet it serves as a decisive break from the constraints of servitude. This violent action symbolises his refusal to continue living within the system's imposed limitations. At the same time, his subsequent transformation into an entrepreneur highlights the paradox of resistance under capitalist modernity. While Balram escapes the immediate oppression, he adopts the same values—ambition, competition, and material success—that initially defined the system he rebelled against. This shift reflects a more profound contradiction: individual rebellion may challenge immediate control but often reproduces the very structures of power and inequality it seeks to resist. Through Balram's journey, Adiga illustrates the complex nature of subaltern resistance in modern India. Awareness of exploitation alone is not sufficient for systemic change, and acts of rebellion, while symbolically significant, may ultimately be constrained by the social and economic frameworks that shape everyday life. The novel thus highlights both the potential and the limitations of resistance within a profoundly unequal society.

Silence, Fear, and Failed Resistance in *Last Man in Tower*

Last Man in Tower explores the difficulties and limitations of collective resistance under capitalist pressures. The story focuses on the residents of Vishram Society, who are confronted with a developer's plan to demolish their building for profit. Initially, they unite to oppose the plan, demonstrating a shared desire to protect their homes and community. However, this unity quickly begins to crumble. Fear, personal ambition, and social isolation impede the residents' ability to maintain solidarity. Each individual begins acting in their own self-interest, prioritising money, security, or convenience over collective action. Through this narrative, Adiga demonstrates how capitalist ideology encourages division and competition rather than cooperation. The residents' inability to unite reflects the broader ways in which capitalist societies foster fragmentation, making resistance difficult. The protagonist, Masterji, becomes a symbol of moral courage as he continues to resist despite growing opposition. However, he ultimately stands alone, and his death marks the collapse of principled resistance against the forces of profit and greed.

The novel illustrates that capitalism not only exploits resources and labour but also undermines social bonds. Without shared awareness and collective action, resistance remains weak and ineffective. Adiga's depiction aligns with Marxist theory, which posits that capitalism alienates individuals from one another, weakening solidarity and making systemic change nearly impossible (Marx 74). *Last Man in Tower*

thus emphasises both the human and structural challenges of opposing capitalist power in contemporary India.

Everyday Resistance in *Between the Assassinations*

The short stories in *Between the Assassinations* focus on the small, everyday ways in which marginalised characters resist oppression. These stories highlight the lives of people living under difficult social and economic conditions, showing how they try to maintain dignity and self-respect despite hostile environments. Their acts of resistance may seem minor or insignificant, but they reveal a growing awareness of the injustice surrounding them. Some characters resist through quiet means, such as staying silent, refusing to comply, or simply surviving against the odds. Others show their defiance through anger, frustration, or subtle rebellion. While these actions do not dismantle the larger system of exploitation, they expose its cruelty and unfairness. By portraying these small acts, Adiga challenges the notion that society is inherently just or fair. Even limited, personal forms of resistance question the dominant social order and give voice to those who are usually overlooked. Short stories in *Between the Assassinations* depict everyday struggles in which resistance manifests in small acts of defiance. Characters confront humiliation and injustice, revealing that even limited resistance “exposes the cruelty of the system” (*Between the Assassinations*). These stories show that class awareness exists even when collective action is absent.

Adiga also emphasises that subaltern resistance is often shaped and restricted by economic necessity. Many characters cannot afford to act openly against injustice because the struggle to survive takes priority. Poverty, fear, and dependence constrain their choices, making organised or collective revolt nearly impossible. Through these stories, Adiga shows that resistance is not always dramatic or revolutionary, but even modest acts of defiance matter. They highlight the courage, awareness, and resilience of marginalised individuals who refuse to accept injustice quietly, revealing the human cost of inequality in contemporary India.

Contradictions of Neoliberal India

Aravind Adiga’s fiction highlights the contradictions of neoliberal India, where rapid economic growth exists alongside moral and social decline. Cities expand, industries flourish, and markets thrive, yet these material advances often come at the expense of human values. Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few, while many continue to struggle with poverty, insecurity, and social exclusion. Adiga’s works show that capitalist modernity brings not only progress but also deepens inequality and reinforces social hierarchies. The lives of subaltern characters in his fiction reflect this tension between hope and despair. They are encouraged to dream of better opportunities, success, and upward mobility, yet social and economic systems deny them the means to realise these aspirations. This situation mirrors Marx’s concept of alienation, in which individuals are separated not only from the products of their labour but also from meaningful work, human connection, and a sense of purpose (Marx 72). In Adiga’s narratives, characters often feel trapped in circumstances beyond their control, unable to change their position within the system.

Importantly, Adiga does not provide simple solutions or offer hope for sudden change. Instead, his fiction exposes the human and moral cost of economic development. By presenting the struggles, compromises, and frustrations of marginalised people, he encourages readers to reflect critically on the ethics of growth and on society's responsibilities. His works provoke questions about justice, fairness, and the human consequences of prioritising profit over people, revealing the complex realities of neoliberal India.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's fiction offers a strong critique of capitalist modernity and its mechanisms of social control. Viewed through a Marxist perspective, his works reveal how capitalism operates as a system that not only organises economic activity but also shapes people's beliefs, desires, and relationships. Institutions such as schools, government offices, the media, and markets play a key role in sustaining inequality. They influence how people think, create consent for exploitation, and often silence marginalised voices. Adiga shows that these structures make it difficult for the poor and powerless to challenge the status quo. His fiction depicts moments of resistance that highlight the emergence of class awareness. Characters gradually recognise the unfairness and exploitation around them, yet their defiance is usually individual, fragmented, and morally complicated rather than collective or revolutionary. This reflects the limitations imposed by a society driven by profit and competition. Adiga illustrates the contradictions of neoliberal India, where rapid economic growth coexists with exploitation, corruption, and social injustice. By giving voice to marginalised characters while also showing the constraints on their actions, Adiga challenges dominant capitalist narratives. His stories encourage readers to think critically about power, ideology, and the ethical implications of progress. Through his sharp observation of inequality and subtle depictions of resistance, Adiga's fiction becomes an important literary intervention, revealing both the human cost of development and the complex dynamics of subaltern life in contemporary India.

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