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URBAN DECAY, MORAL AMBIGUITY, AND THE ANTIHERO: A SOCIO-POLITICAL READING OF ARAVIND ADIGA'S FICTION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

B.E.BUVANESH, PhD Research scholar in VISTAS, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sridevi College of Arts and science

Dr.K.N.Uma Devi, Assistant Professor, Department of English, VISTAS, Pallavaram, Chennai-600017

Abstract

Urban decay, moral ambiguity, and the emergence of the antihero figure are interlinked phenomena that have become defining features of contemporary Indian English fiction. Aravind Adiga's novels examine the contradictions of modern urban life, where the promise of development often hides deep-rooted corruption, exploitation, and inequality. His **protagonists** are not traditional heroes but morally complex individuals navigating a fractured socio-political reality. This paper offers a socio-political reading of Adiga's fiction, analysing how urban decay facilitates moral compromise and shapes the rise of the **antihero**. Through an exploration of *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower*, and *Selection Day*, the study situates Adiga's works within the discourse of contemporary Indian literature, revealing their critical engagement with Neoliberalism, class conflict, and the collapse of moral certainties.

Keywords: Urban Decay, Moral Ambiguity, Antihero, Aravind Adiga, Contemporary Indian Fiction

Introduction

Indian cities in the post-liberalisation era have undergone rapid transformation. The rhetoric of progress and development has been accompanied by deepening social divides and a visible decline in communal ethics. Urban spaces have become sites of both aspiration and alienation, where the glittering promise of modernity often masks the deterioration of public life. Within this socio-economic environment, literature has increasingly reflected the tensions between hope and despair, moral conviction and compromise.

Aravind Adiga's fiction is deeply embedded in this contemporary urban reality. His narratives interrogate the contradictions of neoliberal India, portraying cities as spaces where opportunity is mediated by corruption, and morality is negotiated rather than upheld. The protagonists of his novels resist the archetype of the heroic figure; instead, they embody the complexities, flaws, and survival instincts of the antihero.

Urban Decay in Adiga's Fiction

Urban decay in Adiga's novels is not confined to the deterioration of physical spaces. It also manifests as the breakdown of trust, solidarity, and moral responsibility within the urban community. In *Last Man in Tower*, the Vishram Society apartment complex symbolises a middle-class stability that is steadily eroded by the pressures of real-estate capitalism. The intrusion of developers does not simply alter the physical space; it dismantles the social fabric, pitting neighbour against neighbour.

Similarly, *The White Tiger* presents a dual image of India's urban landscape. On one hand, cities such as Delhi and Gurgaon are shown as thriving hubs of economic growth. On the other, they are marked by infrastructural chaos, pollution, and the stark contrast between opulence and deprivation. Adiga uses these contrasts to reveal the cost of development — the neglect of human dignity and the degradation of shared civic life.

Moral Ambiguity and the Antihero

The antiheroes in Adiga's fiction inhabit a morally ambiguous world. They operate within systems that are already corrupt, and their moral choices are shaped by the necessity of survival. Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* is perhaps the clearest example. His journey from a village boy to a successful entrepreneur involves deception, exploitation, and murder. Yet, Adiga's narrative complicates the moral judgement of such acts by framing them as responses to systemic oppression.

In **Selection Day**, the world of cricket — ostensibly a meritocratic field — is revealed to be equally susceptible to manipulation and exploitation. Manju and Radha, the central characters, must navigate the conflict between personal ambition and ethical restraint. The novel exposes how even seemingly apolitical spaces are infused with the same moral uncertainties that define the broader urban condition.

Socio-Political Dimensions

Adiga's fiction is a critique of the socio-political structures that enable and normalise moral compromise. The neoliberal turn in India's economy has intensified class divides, pushing the underprivileged to adopt morally questionable strategies in order to survive. Corruption, once a deviation from the norm, has become an integral part of urban governance. In this environment, the antihero is not an anomaly but a representative figure.

Through his depictions of decaying urban spaces and morally conflicted characters, Adiga exposes the ethical costs of economic modernisation. His work suggests that the rise of the antihero is symptomatic of a society where ideals have been subordinated to the imperatives of self-interest and competition.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's novels illuminate the complex interplay between urban decay, moral ambiguity, and the antiheroic figure. His urban landscapes, far from being neutral backdrops, are active participants in shaping the destinies of his characters. The crumbling infrastructure, fraying community bonds, and pervasive corruption create an environment where moral clarity is rare, and survival often demands ethical compromise.

In reframing the antihero as a product of contemporary India's socio-political reality, Adiga's fiction challenges conventional notions of heroism. It urges readers to consider whether moral purity is even possible within a corrupt system — and, if not, what kind of heroism might emerge from the ruins of urban modernity.

Here is a **sample "Works Cited" section in MLA 9 format** for your research paper titled "*Urban Decay, Moral Ambiguity, and the Antihero: A Socio-Political Reading of Aravind Adiga's Fiction in Contemporary India*". This list includes Adiga's key works and a selection of relevant critical and theoretical sources to support your analysis.

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