



# Voice, Violence, and Visibility: Narrative Tensions in the Novels of Aravind Adiga

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes Aravind Adiga's narrative techniques in terms of voice, violence, and visibility in his most prominent novels—The White Tiger (2008), Last Man in Tower (2011), Selection Day (2016), and Amnesty (2020). Adiga's fiction is traditionally read as social critique; yet, this work contends that his novels unveil deeper narrative tensions in which voice as a site of agency, violence as literal and structural force, and visibility as negotiating between the poles of recognition and erasure. By close reading, this paper examines how Adiga assigns narrative agency to subaltern figures, dramatizes the encounter of violence and survival, and underscores the fragile visibility of the subaltern subject in a globalized capitalist world. Drawing on theoretical insights from postcolonial studies, narratology, and ethics (Spivak, Agamben, Bhabha), the paper argues that Adiga's novels are not only portraying India's inequities but also dramatizing the struggle of narration. His figures contain contradictions: to speak is to betray, to be silent is to disappear; to be seen is to be under observation, but not to be seen means to be erased. Through exploring these contradictions, the study places Adiga's writing at once realist and allegorical, local and global, ethical and political. Finally, the present paper contends that Adiga's fiction is a narrative ethics of precarity—where narrative becomes inextricable from the struggles over power, violence, and recognition.*

**Keywords:** narrative tension, voice, violence, visibility, postcolonial fiction, narrative ethics

## Introduction

Aravind Adiga holds a landmark position in the modern Indian English novel, with international acclaim through his first novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), for which he won the Man Booker Prize. His fiction since then has continued to captivate a global reading audience by questioning the paradoxes of contemporary India: superlative economic development coexisting with abiding inequality,

opportunity interlinked with corruption, and hopes overshadowed by marginalization. Throughout his body of work—which includes *Last Man in Tower* (2011), *Selection Day* (2016), and *Amnesty* (2020)—Adiga has consistently engaged with issues of class, social stratification, and globalization pressures. His works chart the contradictions of a world trapped between neoliberal aspiration and systemic marginalization, creating characters who hover on



the border between presence and absence, belonging and dispossession.

Even with the critical scrutiny Adiga has garnered, much of the scholarship goes so far as to classify him simply as a "social realist" novelist, a man who chronicles modern Indian society with journalistic accuracy. Readings such as these risk reducing the complexity of his narrative strategies, which do something more than simply represent inequality. Adiga's prose exists within complicated tensions: the battle for speech by marginalized characters, the ubiquity of violence both manifest and structural, and the unstable politics of visibility in cultures where to be seen is also to be watched or sold. To reduce Adiga's fiction to realism is to ignore the way his stories themselves dramatize the very conflicts they report, setting up struggles around who speaks and who is silenced, and what kinds of violence or erasure underwrite mundane life. One useful way to engage with these tensions is through theoretical readings that privilege voice, violence, and visibility as analytic categories. In her classic essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak poses the pointed question of whether subaltern subjects can possibly achieve representation or if their voices are necessarily mediated and taken over by master powers (Spivak 271).

Adiga's protagonists—be they Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* or Danny in *Amnesty*—speak from the margins, but their voices continue to be wrapped in irony, fear, or compromise, making the act of narration itself complex. Violence in Adiga's novels can be interpreted through theoretical models that extend beyond the literal act to include systemic and structural forces. Frantz Fanon has theorized that colonial and postcolonial societies are characterized by an initial violence that organizes both power and resistance (Fanon 35). Johan Galtung's concept of "structural violence" further broadens this idea to encompass types of deprivation, inequality, and oppression that injure without overt physical violence (Galtung 171). Adiga's fiction also often shows these types of violence: the violence of poor people being coerced by landlords and capitalists, the

emotional violence of parents' ambition in *Selection Day*, and the psychological violence of perpetual fear in *Amnesty*.

The issue of visibility, lastly, can be explained by Michel Foucault's surveillance theory and Giorgio Agamben's "bare life" concept. Foucault points out how contemporary societies function through making people visible via disciplinary methods, in which to be visible is to be governed (Foucault 187). Agamben, conversely, theorizes the subject diminished to "bare life"—deprived of political or social acknowledgment and present only as a biological creature subject to power (Agamben 9). Adiga's figures tend to swing between these two states: Balram in *The White Tiger* yearns for acknowledgment and visibility as a businessman, whereas Danny in *Amnesty* endures involuntary hyper-visibility under the watch of the state. Visibility, in Adiga's writing, is a double-edged status, promising voice but risking erasure or punishment.

This paper contends that throughout his novels, Adiga stages narrative conflict in which the struggle for voice confronts systemic violence, and visibility vacillates between empowerment and peril. His fiction puts narrative itself center stage: to speak is a gesture of resistance but also one of treachery; to be invisible provides protection but also means being erased. Far from providing transparent windows onto social reality, Adiga's stories present battles between ethics, politics, and representation, highlighting the instability of existence in contemporary India and elsewhere. Methodologically, this research performs a comparative reading of Adiga's four big novels to map the continuity and development of his narrative tactics. By placing *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Selection Day*, and *Amnesty* side by side, the paper illustrates how Adiga's fiction finds its way between realism and allegory, local concerns and global resonances, individual struggles and structural forces. Under this comparative analysis, the examination brings out the ways in which voice, violence, and visibility define not only Adiga's thematic agendas but also make up the very substance of his narrative strategy.



## Discussion

Among the most surprising things about Aravind Adiga's fiction is his long-standing interest in narrative voice, particularly when it comes from the periphery of society. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai, erstwhile chauffeur, entrepreneur, takes narrative control through a series of confessional letters to the Premier of China. The addressee is chosen ironically, since Balram places his own account of murder and rise within the universal discourse of modernization and capitalism. His letters disrupt traditional hierarchies of narrative legitimacy: a servant, hitherto bound by silence, is given the right suddenly to teach a world leader about India. But Balram's voice is by no means simple. It is built out of irony, exaggeration, and rationalization, so that his account is as much a performance as it is testimony. The above-cited question of Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" is invoked and disturbed here.

Balram does have a voice, but his voice is mediated by the action of murder and hence raises questions about ethics of whether a voice from the periphery can speak without being complicit in violence (Spivak 285). In *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga gives up the monologue voice for a polyphonic one. The novel offers several voices from dwellers of a Mumbai residential society under the threat of a powerful developer's acquisition. The plurality of voices disperses narrative authority; there is no one truth. Rather, the story vacillates among the opposing testimonies, revealing the ways in which community bonds are broken by economic strain. The polyphony is not only evidence of the democratic impulse of narrative but also its instability: voices intermingle, contradict, and drown each other out. Here, Adiga highlights that narrative authority is ever in question, set in the din of clashing interests. *Selection Day* maintains this voice destabilization, though at a more muted pitch. The novel is plotted on the dreams of two young brothers, Radha and Manju, whose destinies are written by their father's cricket mania. The boys' broken wishes are articulated through their interactions with the sport, which is the language of their subjectivity. Cricket is not a neutral space but a

neoliberal pressure point: it commodifies talent, prescribes life paths, and makes voice indistinguishable from performance. The boys' narratives are externalized by selectors, sponsors, coaches, who have the power to amplify or choke their voices.

Narrative authority in this case is mediated through commodification systems, uncovering how neoliberal culture internalizes individual desire into marketable narratives. In *Amnesty*, voice is manifested in the form of Danny's conflicted, anxious internal monologue as he weighs reporting a murder he is aware of to the police. The illegal Tamil refugee, Danny, represents the vulnerability of voice when anchored to illegality. His account is punctuated by interruptions, anxieties, and silences; he is constantly conscious of the fact that speaking might mean exposure. His voice is limited, burdened by a fear of deportation, yet it is the very container in which the narrative finds its way. Adiga thus dramatizes the voice paradox under conditions of precarity: narrative is required but risky, empowering but menacing. Throughout these novels, Adiga shows that voice never stands still or independently. It always intersects with power structures—whether it be global capitalism, communal pressures, neoliberal economies, or immigration policies. Narrative power in Adiga's works is not a premise but a site of struggle, where even the act of speech is one of compromise, complicity, and negotiation.

If voice in Adiga's work is tenuous, it is because it is indistinguishable from violence. Violence, in the world of Adiga's fiction, is not restricted to spectacular violence but infects social and psychological frameworks. *The White Tiger* shows this most starkly in Balram's killing of his boss, Ashok. The killing is not personal revenge; it is described as a matter of upward mobility. Balram insists on violence as the single avenue for escape from bondage by the servant, revealing how inequalities that are embedded in the system provide a context where physical violence is used as a liberatory mechanism. Fanon's argument that colonial systems reproduce themselves in violence, and that decolonization is often ruptural violence



(Fanon 37), rings loud here. But Adiga complicates Fanon by infusing violence into narrative structure: the killing is not merely an event in the tale but the axis around which the very telling revolves. Without the act of murder, Balram would have no tale to tell.

In *Last Man in Tower*, violence is less about physical action than social coercion. The people living in the Vishram Society come to be turned against Masterji, that single man who refuses to sell his apartment to the builder. The community, once united, is split under duress, and Masterji is the target of harassment, intimidation, and finally abandonment. This story illustrates what Johan Galtung calls "structural violence"—indirect, systemic, and institutionalized harm (Galtung 172). There is no direct blow, yet the coercion and betrayal that Masterji suffers are violent in their impact, stripping him of his dignity and security. The violence here is communal, being situated within economic structures that set neighbor against neighbour.

*Selection Day* flips the register once more, depicting the brutality of ambition and patriarchy. The relentless bullying by the father of his sons to excel at cricket is a form of emotional abuse, and one that constructs their sense of self around performance and perpetuates ongoing anxiety. The brutality is mental, internalized within the boys' sense of self-worth and failure. It is also cultural, in that it reveals how neoliberal cultures privilege competition to the extent of self-annihilation. Adiga shows that violence doesn't have to be physical in order to be damaging; it can take the forms of silent coercions of expectation and the inner wounds of disappointment.

In *Amnesty*, violence presents itself as the ambient climate of fear that organizes Danny's world. The policing systems of the state make him continuously at risk, his existence criminalized. Visibility to the police equates to exposure to violence—detention, deportation, or humiliation. This is psychological violence in its most insidious form, where surveillance seeps into every corner of the subject's life, undermining their sense of security and agency. Foucault's own analysis of contemporary regimes of surveillance works here: sight is not

neutral but a form of control (Foucault 191). Adiga illustrates how the threat of violence becomes impossible to distinguish from violence itself, regulating conduct and silencing speech. Adiga's stories imply that violence is not merely described but inherent in narrative form itself. Every story is driven by violent rupture: a killing, a betrayal, an abandonment, a fear. Violence is both thematic subject matter and narrative engine, reminding the reader that stories from the margins are often indistinguishable from trauma, coercion, and rupture.

A third of Adiga's narrative strategy is visibility—i.e., the question of who sees, how, and with what effects. In *The White Tiger*, Balram longs to be visible as a businessman, to be seen as a self-made man in a rapidly modernizing India. But this visibility is two-edged. To be visible is to be open to his crime being exposed, to be open to surveillance by an Indian society still unfriendly to his offense. His achievement is predicated upon strategically controlling the conditions of his visibility, staging the conflict between recognition and secrecy. In *Last Man in Tower*, visibility is equated with commodification. The inhabitants of Vishram Society become visible to investors and developers only as property, their identities boiled down to square metres and financial worth. They are visible, not as citizens or people, but as commodities to be bought, sold, or intimidated. This renders them hyper-visible from an economic perspective but invisible as agential, dignified subjects. The book demonstrates how neoliberal capitalism reconstitutes visibility as commodification, eliminating subjectivity at the moment of recognition. In *Selection Day*, visibility is framed by cricket, the national fixation and a money-making business. The young heroes pursue visibility through performance, their selves tied to how selectors, coaches, and spectators see them. But the visibility offered is exploitative, reducing them to items in the global sports economy. Their individuality is obliterated in the glare of celebrity culture, where talent is valued only for its profitability. Adiga thus criticizes the neoliberal ideology that confuses visibility with value, revealing the violence inherent in systems of



recognition. In *Amnesty*, visibility takes another turn. Danny desires invisibility as a survival strategy, because he knows that visibility to the state means deportation. But he is confronted with the irony of hyper-visibility: as a migrant body in Sydney, he is branded, policed, and surveilled. Agamben's description of "bare life" is useful here: Danny is a life bereft of political rights, exposed to power and unilaterally at its mercy (Agamben 12). His over-visibility to the state coexists with his invisibility as a human subject who has claims to belonging. The novel stages the instability of visibility under conditions of illegality, where recognition comes with risk rather than empowerment. Adiga's fiction thus challenges contemporary regimes of visibility. Being seen is not always the same as being acknowledged; it can be commodification, surveillance, or erasure. Visibility is between empowerment and risk, recognition and domination, making it a fundamental tension of his world.

### Conclusion

This study has argued that Adiga's novels are best understood through the interlocking tensions of voice, violence, and visibility. Balam's confessional audacity, Masterji's silenced resistance, Manju's fractured ambition, and Danny's fearful hesitation all dramatize how voice is constrained by violence and visibility. Rather than presenting straightforward realism, Adiga crafts narratives that stage ethical and political dilemmas: Who can speak? At what cost? What forms of violence remain unseen? What does it

mean to be visible? These questions animate his work and ensure its continued relevance in discussions of postcolonial fiction, globalization, and narrative ethics. Ultimately, Adiga's contribution lies in revealing that storytelling is itself a contested act—where narrating from the margins exposes the contradictions of modernity, and where every narrative is implicated in the structures it seeks to critique.

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