

## ECOCRITICISM OF ARAVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER

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### ABSTRACT

*Ecocriticism is the study of relationship between literature and the physical environment. It takes an earth centered approach to literary studies. It is unique among contemporary literary and cultural theories because of its close relation with the science of ecology. Ecology is interconnection between all living organisms and their environment. Climate change, all sorts of pollution, deforestation, endangered animals are all ecological problems. Moreover, India is facing an acute river pollution crisis these days. The river Ganges or the Ganga is home to a rich diversity of vegetation and animal life and sustains a vast human population with water for drinking, irrigation, industries and other purposes. Industry commerce and transport are considered to be main causes of air pollutants. The Indian urban scene however sees transportation as the main cause of air pollution. The paper aims at presenting the ecological degradation in both rural and urban India as depicted in Aravind Adiga's first novel **The White Tiger**.*

**Keywords:** *Ecological degradation, Environment, Industries, Pollution, Transport.*

### FULL PAPER

Aravind Adiga's first novel **The White Tiger** won the Man Booker Prize in 2008. It is a satirical take on the class struggle in India. Critics see it as a glorification of crime, violence and immorality. The novel depicts a society in which many of the negative aspects of a market society are pervasive. It presents the gulf between rich and poor, the breakdown of older agrarian feudal social relations and dependencies, the commodification of the working class as abstract and dehumanized labour, the hidden guilt and corruption of the middle class and the consequent recourse to crime as the part of the working class. To these are added Indian reflections: the role played by Hinduism and the caste system in social conservatism and retarding change, the cultural politics of the north-south divide, the ambivalent position of the NRI and other. But this paper aims at presenting the ecological degradation in both rural and urban India as depicted by the author through the narrator.

In the novel, the author expresses his concern at the growing pollution of the Ganga. It is of immense religious and symbolic value to millions of Hindus, who use its water for many rituals and choose it as receptacle for their ashes



after death. Consequently, the Ganga, officially declared as India's 'National River' by the then Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2008, has turned into one of most polluted rivers in the world. In most cities, air pollution is attributed to a wide variety of factors. It is a river of outstanding importance materially as much as spiritually. It acts as a lifeline for northern India. It is a source of irrigation for farmers and it is a source of domestic and industrial water as well as hydropower for cities. The basin supports rich aquatic and terrestrial ecosystem, with rare and endemic species and fascinating landscapes. To India's Hindus, the Ganga is a holy river. Each day large number of Hindus bathe, drink from, or take a dip in the river for religious reasons. But it is highly polluted. Almost 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the country's population live in the river basin. Very little of the sewage and industrial waste is treated. This situation is complicated by the Hindus belief. According to ancient scriptures, the river descends when king Bhagiratha summons to a goddess to wash away the sins of his ancestors which is still being followed by millions of Hindus who bathe in the holy water, cremate the dead and immerse the ashes of their dead for the river to carry the soul to heaven. Traditionally, wood fires are used to burn most bodies. This creates air pollution. It also causes water pollution. Because many people cannot afford enough wood for cremation, many unburned or partially burnt bodies are dumped into the river where they mingle with large number of livestock corpses. So, the causes for the gross pollution of the river are municipal sewage, industrial effluents, corpses and carcasses etc.

The author through the narrator thus says: "We live in a glorious land. The Lord Buddha received his enlightenment in this land. The river Ganga gives life to our plants and our animals and our people. We are grateful to God that we were born in this land" (Adiga, 19). At least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies.

The most sacred river which is worshipped as the goddess is extremely polluted because of sewage, industrial waste, religious offerings. At the ghats, the bones and ashes of the deceased, and half burned dead bodies are thrown into it after the cremation. The narrator calls it Black river, River of Death. "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river." (8)

The banks of the river are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it. "Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness." (8)

It is the custom that people take a holy dip in the Ganga called the river of emancipation. The narrator advises not to dip in the Ganga as it is full of feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids. When he was six or seven or eight years old like no one in his village knows his exact age, he went to the holiest spot on the banks of the Ganga—the city of Benaras for cremating his mother's dead body. He smelled the river before he saw it: a stench of decaying flesh.

The author brings to vision the firewood being split, the wooden platform built by the edge of the ghat, just above the water; logs piled up on the platform, and men with axes smashing the logs. He paints vividly the platform with the piled-up fire logs, a giant oozing mound of black mud where the river washes into the shore, and the mound littered with all the left out wastes of the rites and rituals. The narrator understands: “This was the real god of Benaras—this black mud of the Ganga into which everything died, and decomposed, and was reborn from, and died into again. The same would happen to me when I died and they brought me here. Nothing would get liberated here” (10). He faints for the first time in his life. He hasn't been back to see the Ganga since then.

The author describes the environment of the village Laxmangarh, in the district of Gaya in a vivid manner. “There is a small branch of the Ganga that flows just outside Laxmangarh; boats come down from the world outside, bringing supplies every Monday. There is one street in the village; a bright strip of sewage splits it into two” (10). The description includes the market and the temple of Hanuman, everyone's favorite god in the Darkness. He presents a typical Indian village with the defunct electricity poles, broken water tap, families of hogs are sniffing through sewage, roosters flying up and down the roofs of the house. It is quite evident that the villages depend on cows and buffalo for their livelihood. The water buffalo is the fattest thing in every house in the village. All day long, the women feed her fresh grass which is the main thing in their lives. Their hopes are in her fatness. If she gives enough milk, the women can sell some of it to get a little more money at the end of the day. The author depicts the condition of a pond which is the habitat for the buffaloes instead of source of water for people. “Boulders from the walls of the fort have rolled down the hill and tumbled into the pond, where they lie, moist and half submerged in the muddy water.” (12)

The author presents the condition of schools in remote villages like Laxmangarh where the classroom is not well-lit and the three walls around are like red wallpaper because of spitting of paan on it by the schoolteacher. The narrator is afraid to go to school because it has two-foot-long lizards which hide in its cupboards. Ironically he says, “If the Indian village is a paradise, then the school is a paradise within a paradise.” (18)

The author feels bad at the worst condition of hospitals. The narrator takes his father who has Tuberculosis with lots of difficulty to a hospital. He describes thus: “There were three black goats sitting on the steps to the large, faded white building; the stench of goat feces wafted out from the open door. The glass in most of the windows was broken; a cat was staring out at us from one cracked window” (26). The narrator carries his father in, stamping on the goat turds on the ground. There is no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy, after they bribe him ten rupees, says that a doctor might come in the evening as he works for a private hospital. The doors to the hospital's rooms are wide open; the beds have metal springs sticking out of them, and the cat begins snarling at them the moment when they step into the room. He lowers his father onto the newspaper sheets. His father dies of Tuberculosis as he could not get right treatment. This shows the unhygienic condition of hospitals which is responsible for not subsiding the disease but leads to the decease.



While portraying the ecological aspects of rural India, the author discusses the ecological degradation in urban India. In most cities, air pollution is attributed to a wide variety of factors. The author describes the coal mines in Dhanbad and shows how these mines are source of air pollution which go on and on for miles and miles outside the town. In some places there are fires burning under the earth and sending smoke into the air.

Industry, commerce and transport are considered to be main causes of air pollutants. The Indian urban scene however sees transportation as the main cause of air pollution. The quality of air has deteriorated beyond permissible levels by increasing vehicular emissions.

“Fumes filled the air. Wisps of blue exhaust glowed in front of every headlight; the exhaust grew so fat and thick it could not rise or escape, but spread horizontally, sluggish and glossy, making a kind of fog around us. Matches were continually being struck—the drivers of autorickshaws lit cigarettes, adding tobacco pollution to petrol pollution.” (77)

Besides presenting the fierce jam of Gurgoan, the author presents the adverse affect of air pollution also. The autorickshaw driver next to the narrator begins to cough violently.

The author presents the unhygienic condition of Pahar Ganj railway station in Delhi where people lying on the floor, dogs sniffing at the garbage and ‘the air was moldy’. He also feels bad at people who are forced to spend time outside in winter, burning cellophane to keep warm. He tells the problem associated with it thus: “The only problem is that while burning, it gives off a white smoke that makes your stomach churn” (90). This shows author’s concern on the environment and also the bad impact of burning cellophane on health.

India wants to be free from open defecation and the government is also taking measures. In this novel the author shows that still in the slums there is open defecation. “The men were defecating in the open like a defensive wall in front of the slum: making a line that no respectable human should cross” (154). He also presents the worst environment of the slum where people are building homes for the rich living in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets in lanes of sewage. This also shows how people in the slums are leading their horrible life amidst “the stronger stench of industrial sewage”

The author shows how the south Indian cities are also equally polluted. He describes the atmospheric pollution in Bangalore, “a decent city, where humans can live like humans and animals can live like animals”. When the narrator drives down Hosur Main Road and turns into Electronics City Phase, he is excited to see the companies in Bangalore. He is equally astonished to see piles of mud, and bricks everywhere. “The entire city is masked in smoke, smog, powder, cement dust. It is under a veil. When the veil is lifted, what will Bangalore be like? Maybe it will be a disaster: slums, sewage, shopping malls, traffic jams, policemen.” Industries and vehicles are the biggest sources of pollution. The rate at which vehicular traffic is growing is astonishing. This is no less true in Bangalore.

To conclude, the author has depicted all the elements of the environment and its degradation. Water is the lifeblood of civilization. Nearly all of the country’s major rivers are burdened with immense amounts of municipal sewage, industrial effluents, solid waste and other harmful substances. Agricultural runoff solid waste and waste generated in

connection with religious worship count among the many sources of pollution. The slow death of India's river is part of the nation's much more extensive environmental crisis. He has pondered over how the sacred river, Ganga is polluted to the utmost level and the air that man breathes is polluted by industrial and automobile emission which in turn leads to the critical state of life of the people living in both rural and urban India.

#### **REFERENCE**

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger: A Novel*. Free Press, New York: 2008. (All references are to this edition)