

**THE TRAUMA OF NEO-COLONIALISM IN  
ARUNDHATI ROY'S *THE GOD OF SMALL  
THINGS* AND ARAVIND ADIGA'S  
*THE WHITE TIGER***

*Ksenija Švarc*

**INTRODUCTION**

EVEN though India gained its independence in 1947, it still continues to be ruled by its former colonizers and the new colonial elites more or less indirectly through the influence of multinational corporations on the government of India, which has facilitated the implementation of their decisions. Roy deliberately euphemizes this by calling it "creating a good investment climate" (Arundhati 2008, 33), whereas Kwame Nkrumah gives it the title neocolonialism. In other words, neocolonialism is a model of indirect subjugation that has been taking place for over fifty years, but it experienced an upswing only in the 1980's with the advent of corporate globalization and its dominant ideology of neoliberal capitalism. With the installation of neoliberal ideologues like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan as the heads of the most powerful states, favourable conditions were created for the introduction of the main principles of neoliberal economic reforms, i.e. liberalization of the market, cutting expenditure for social services, deregulation, privatization, and the elimination of the concept of "the public good" or "community" (Martinez and Garcia 2013). This model was implemented throughout the world, and particularly in less developed countries like India, which were impoverished due to the structural crisis of the 1970's, and thus needed aid in the form of loans to rebuild their devastated economies. Nevertheless, loans were given based solely on strict observance and implementation of the requirements of international financial institutions like the IMF and the World Bank, which in those countries effected debts that would never be repaid. However, in analyzing the postcolonial states Majid warns that

“[neo]colonialism (managed by a global alliance of imperial elites and their comprador partner) is intensifying even as we look for cracks in its fabric” (2008, 135), and that not only India, Morocco, and African states are today ruled by neocolonial elites, but that the same is happening in cities all over the US and Europe. Those imperial elites through multinational corporations are today the ones who control the electricity, water, food, entertainment, and most any other imaginable aspect of life and economy not only in India but all over the world.

The neoliberal ideology of this neocolonial model of economy has often been criticized in the contemporary Indian-English novels. Most of them have expressed a subversive attitude towards the ongoing neocolonial processes, which is in accordance with Said’s statement that “reading and writing texts are never neutral activities: there are interests, powers, passions, pleasures entailed no matter how aesthetic or entertaining the work. Media, political economy, mass institutions – in fine, the tracings of secular power and the influence of the state – are part of what we call literature” (1994, 385). In these novels the subversion of the neocolonial process is achieved through the portrayal of the trauma they effect in the environment, in the culture, and in individuals due to sudden and sometimes violent changes in the society. In order to illustrate what is meant by these three types of trauma this paper will analyze their manifestations in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*.

## TRAUMA OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Both the natural and the social environment of India have changed drastically in the last thirty years, which is largely the consequence of reforms implemented by the Indian government to facilitate the entry of the largest multinational companies into the newly liberalized Indian market. The result of liberalization was a sudden change in the urban environment, where new, modern, westernized cities that attracted new inhabitants were erected at the sites of former small towns, and villages. Adiga adopts a skeptical attitude towards these new cities and describes them as “provincial towns that have the pollution and noise and traffic of a big city – without any hint

of the true city's sense of history, planning and grandeur. Half-baked cities, built for half-baked men" (2008, 52). However, Adiga does not romanticize the villages. Moreover, in *The White Tiger* he expresses the dichotomy of village versus city by distinguishing between the India of Light, i.e. all the areas immediately at the ocean, and the India of Darkness, i.e. rural India following the flow of the river Ganges (2008, 14). The India of Darkness is epitomized in Laxmangarh, the protagonist's home village, a "typical Indian village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water and working telephones" in which "the children . . . [are] raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables, and lentils, [and] will be found, when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations" (Adiga 2008, 19). Here Adiga directly criticizes both the Indian government and the international standards, by adding later in the text: "Electricity poles – defunct. Water tap – broken. Children – too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India" (2008, 20).

The inhabitants of villages are not only faced with abject living conditions, but also with constant pauperization due to the loss of land, whether through encroachment of urban dwellings, or through forced relocation because of land restructuring. It should thus not come as a surprise that urbanization is so much on the rise. In fact, in 2008, the finance minister P. Chidambaram stated that his vision was that in the shortest time eighty-five percent of India's population will live in cities (Roy 2008, xv), nevertheless his plan has had terrible consequences for the rural population. The Indian state has, with approval of multinational corporations, already begun a process of forcing the poorest of the poor: the Dalits, i.e. untouchables, and the Adivasis, i.e. the tribals, to leave their lands to make way for gigantic infrastructural projects like huge dams, or the exploitation of natural resources on which their settlements are located. The consequence of this race for profit is the relocation of millions of people from their homes and lands in rural India (Roy 2008, xiv). The only course of action left for them is to migrate to the new cities in search of jobs and new prospects. Adiga describes the onrush of people from the villages to larger metropolitan centers like Delhi by describing the

entrance roads to the capital where “there were buses and jeeps along the road . . . bursting with passengers who packed the insides and hung out of the doors, and even got on the roofs. They were all headed from the Darkness to Delhi. You’d think the whole world was migrating” (2008, 111).

However, as Davis states, only a very small number of the newly arrived urban immigrants do manage to find placement and housing (2011, 25), mostly in construction industry, whereas the rest are forced to earn their living by begging, violence and crime. The overpopulation of big and middle-sized cities leads to another problem identifiable in these two novels, which is the spreading of slums. According to Davis, India is the world leader in slum dwelling with Bombay as the global capital with ten to twelve million slum inhabitants, followed by Delhi with six to eight million (2011, 30). In *The White Tiger* Adiga clearly shows what happens to people who arrive from the villages with high hopes of new and improved lives on the example of Gurgaon, the most westernized suburb of Delhi, where, only a few miles down the road to the modern building blocks, shopping malls, and office buildings, there is a slum where construction workers who are building those very shopping malls and giant apartment buildings of the new India live: “These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. The slum ended in an open sewer – a small river of black water went sluggishly past . . . Two children were splashing about in the black water” (Adiga 2008, 260).

In *The God of Small Things* Roy focuses the plot of the novel in one place and two times, namely the village of Ayemenem in the 1960’s and the 1990’s. Formerly a small, quiet village, surrounded by a lush jungle and the river Meenachal, in the 1990’s Ayemenem has become a middle-sized town with both modern dwellings for the wealthy middle-class, and shanties for the slum dwellers. Because of the influx of new inhabitants, whose “new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses [were] built by nurses, masons, wirebenders and bank clerks who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places” (Adiga 2008, 13) and the ones who lived in the slum bordering on a new five-star hotel, a previously peaceful village has become overpopulated with “a press of people who could gather at a moment’s notice. To beat to death a careless bus driver. To smash the windscreen of a

car" (Adiga 2008, 13). Roy's account is consistent with the actual unprecedented increase in the urban ratio of small and middle-sized towns described in Davis (2011, 16). However, due to a vast influx of population these towns started encroaching on arable land which created a problem for the villagers who had abruptly become homeless and without land to till. According to Davis more than 50,000 hectares of arable land with various crops were lost because of the growing cities (2011, 136). Paradoxically, more land was needed for the growing of marketable crops, whose mutated seed impoverished villagers were forced under patent laws to buy from multinational agro-businesses. Thus started the redirection of the flow of rivers, and the building of gigantic dams like the ones in the Narmada valley, which have left millions of people homeless and landless, and forced them to search for new prospects in the bright new world of New India's cities.

Roy portrays the trauma of natural environment by juxtaposing the images of the river Meenachal in the past and in the present. The Meenachal of the 1960's was "graygreen. With fish in it. The sky and the trees in it. And at night the broken yellow moon in it" (1997, 203), whereas in the 1990's it has become "just a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea" (1997, 125). A part of its transformation is also the smell of "shit, and pesticides bought with World Bank loans" (1997, 13). Obviously, in such conditions the fauna of the river could not survive, thus "most of the fish had died. The ones that survived suffered from fin-rot and had broken out in boils" (1997, 13). Roy furthermore describes the changed nature of the river relating its devastation directly to changes in Indian economy which neoliberal capitalism has brought about in the following way: "Downriver, a saltwater barrage had been built, in exchange for votes from the influential paddy-farmer lobby. The barrage regulated the inflow of saltwater from the backwaters that opened into the Arabian Sea. So now they had two harvests a year instead of one. More rice for the price of a river" (1997, 125).

In this paragraph she addresses the issues of water pollution, dam building, and the disruption and redirection of the natural flow of rivers. She vividly portrays the consequences of changes in the agricultural industry of India, and the repercussions they have had on the natural environment, thus offering a

clear critique of the race for profit imposed by international agro-business corporations and the government of India. The market-oriented logic forces the farmers to change their natural environment in order to have two annual harvests instead of one, which, eventually, can and does have disastrous consequences for the ecosystem of the Keralan backwaters.

This part of India, dubbed “God’s Own Country,” has attracted many tourists who enjoy in the diversity of its ecosystem. Roy is, however, convinced that the costs that tourism incurs on the natural and social environment are much larger than the benefits it has for the economy:

The hotel guests were ferried across the backwaters, straight from Cochin. They arrived by speedboat, opening up a V of foam on the water, leaving behind a rainbow film of gasoline. The view from the hotel was beautiful, but here too the water was thick and toxic. *No Swimming* signs had been put up in stylish calligraphy. They had built a tall wall to screen off the slum and prevent it from encroaching on Kari Saipu’s estate. There wasn’t much they could do about the smell. (1997, 125)

## TRAUMA OF CULTURE

However, it is not only the environment that suffers from the onslaught of tourism, but culture in its traditional form as well. In the hotel which was erected at the site of the former rubber estate tourists can enjoy in many traditional things, such as “furniture and knick-knacks that came with the house . . . A reed umbrella, a wicker couch. A wooden dowry box. . . . labelled with edifying placards which said *Traditional Kerala Umbrella* and *Traditional Bridal Dowry Box*” (Roy 1997, 125), as well as the performances of the regional dance *katakali* whose “ancient stories were collapsed and amputated. Six-hour classics were slashed to twenty-minute cameos” (Roy 1997, 126). Here Roy criticizes the fact that the acceptance of neoliberal ideology has forced tradition and culture to become mere commodities.

Contemporary culture, as depicted in Roy and Adiga is a combination of TV, shopping, multiplexes and drinking. Whereas formerly Anglophone culture was absorbed through books, music and films, the main medium has changed to ad-

vertisements and TV, which are brainwashing the Indian audience with a schizoid mix of soap operas, sports, televised wars, talk shows, and aggressive commercials which Roy ironizes in this paragraph:

in Ayemenem, where once the loudest sound had been a musical bus horn, now whole wars, famines, picturesque massacres and Bill Clinton could be summoned up like servants. And so, while her ornamental garden wilted and died, Baby Kochamma followed American NBA, league games, one-day cricket and all the Grand Slam tennis tournaments. On weekdays she watched *The Bold and The Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara*, where brittle blondes with lipstick and hairstyles rigid with space seduced androids and defended their sexual empires. Baby Kochamma loved their shiny clothes and the smart, bitchy repartee. During the day disconnected snatches of it came back to her and made her chuckle. (1997, 27–28)

According to Roy this daily brainwashing serves the purpose of “globalization [which] means standardization. The very rich and the very poor must want the same things, but only the rich can have them” (2008d, 54). Thus the rift between the very rich and the abjectly poor is not closing but widening even more.

Adiga uses the image of the shopping mall, the temple of modern consumerism, as a metaphor for the Americanized style of life to which the poor do not have access, not even language-wise: “‘Going to the mall, sir?’ . . . ‘It’s not *maal*, it’s a mall,’ he said. ‘Say it again.’ I kept saying ‘*maal*’ and they kept asking me to repeat it, and then giggled hysterically each time I did so” (2008, 146). Thus English once again proves the preferred device of cultural denigration and the most lasting mark that British colonial rule has left on the culture of India.

When English was introduced as the language of instruction in schools and universities, the final aim was to develop a class of Indians whose tastes, lifestyles, language and education will be more English than Indian in order to serve as interpreters between the colonizers and the colonized, as was expounded in Thomas Babington Macaulay’s *Minute on Education*<sup>1</sup>. The ready acceptance of the Americanization and west-

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1. “Minute by the Hon’ble T.B.Macaulay, dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1835”

ernization of modern culture by members of the Indian elite is today the living proof of how successful the British have been in this endeavor. In accordance with this Roy portrays her protagonists as “family of Anglophiles” who were “pointed in the wrong direction, trapped outside their own history, and unable to retrace their steps because their footprints had been swept away” (1997, 52). Furthermore in *The God of Small Things* she shows how, most notably, this affected children, who are in certain social environments and situations even required to use English exclusively:

Whenever she caught them speaking Malayalam, she levied a small fine which was deducted at source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines— ‘impositions’ she called them— I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English. A hundred times each. . . . She had made them practice an English car song for the way back. They had to form the words properly, and be particularly careful about their pronunciation.

(Roy 1997, 36)

In the globalized market of contemporary India, English has become even more important due to the outsourcing of the communication industry. The people working in call-centers are coached to speak English with a perfect accent, given new Anglicized names, because their real names are unpronounceable for their customers, and thus their identity is being, not only changed, but completely wiped out. The question remains whether the loss of identity is too high a price for a life of luxury? When questioned about this issue Roy explains that this forceful modification of identity signals that their true identities are not wanted in the globalized market and warns that this leads to a distorted self-image and potential mental disorders. She also refuses the justification that they at least do have a job, usually given by proponents of neoliberalism no matter whether they speak about call-centre workers, sweatshop workers, or sex workers. Roy exposes the inherent cynicism of such claims in saying that “the premise is that either these workers don’t have jobs or they have jobs in which they have to humiliate themselves. But is that the only choice? That’s the question” (2010a, 90).

## TRAUMA OF THE INDIVIDUAL

This binary logic of either, or, is what strikes one the most when reading Indian English novels. It was also the guiding idea of the 2007 India Poised campaign speech to celebrate sixty years of India's independence:

There are two Indias in this country. One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has been recently showering upon us. The other India is the leash. One India says, 'Give me a chance and I'll prove myself.' The other India says, 'Prove yourself first, and maybe then, you'll have a chance.' One India lives in the optimism of our hearts. The Other India lurks in the skepticism of our minds. One India wants, the other India hopes. One India leads, the Other India follows. The conversions are on the rise. With each passing day, more and more people from the Other India are coming over to this side. And quietly, while the world is not looking, a pulsating, dynamic new India is emerging. (Roy 2008c, 157-158)

Adiga echoes this speech by saying that "Delhi is the capital of not one but *two* countries – two Indias. The Light and the Darkness both flow in to Delhi. Gurgaon, where Mr Ashok lived, is the bright, modern end of the city, and this place, Old Delhi, is the other end. Full of things that the modern world forgot all about" (2008, 251-252).

Accordingly, Roy provides an image of the new Indian elite, the "Sky citizens," who live, just as the elite anywhere in the world does, in an exclusive world they have created for themselves, where the poor have limited or no access (2008c, 152-153). Moreover, both authors use irony in depicting the absurdities of contemporary Indian society, by juxtaposing the situations of the rich with the situations of the poor. The most absurd is the desire of the rich to be thinner in a country where the majority of people are suffering malnutrition, as Adiga shows by contrasting a stick-thin rickshaw driver with the ideal image of Western male physical beauty:

A rickshaw puller drove up to me, a small, unshaven stick-thin man, who looked dead tired . . . On the seat of

his rickshaw was a white advertising sticker: IS EXCESS WEIGHT A PROBLEM FOR YOU? CALL JIMMY SINGH AT METRO GYM . . . The mascot of the gym—an American with enormous white muscles—smiled at me from above the slogan. (2008, 219)

In order to illustrate the detachment of the upper class from the real life, Roy points to the house of a former landlord family, the centre of which is in contemporary time the TV-set, which, Roy uses to ironize the fears of the protagonists' rich grand-aunt who was "frightened by the BBC famines and Television wars that she encountered while she channel surfed. Her old fears of the Revolution and the Marxist-Leninist menace had been rekindled by new television worries about the growing numbers of desperate and dispossessed people. She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture" (1997, 28).

What enabled the upper class to follow a lifestyle that is completely divorced from the lifestyle of the rest of the country, is the opening of India's economy to the world market and the consequential transfer of the largest multinational corporations to cities in India. This move has created jobs for highly-skilled professionals who in the earlier days were exported to the Silicon Valley, but were now coming back in order to work for the same corporations in the New Economic Zones of global India. Meanwhile, the poor were being left behind, as their numbers were growing to a staggering 56 million while their living conditions were worsening because of the changes brought on by the neoliberal restructuring of the economy (Davis 2011, 169). Accordingly, what awaited the poor villagers in the cities was unemployment, homelessness, violence and crime or, if they could find a job, a life of merciless exploitation at the hands of major global capital players. In explaining how global capital and immigrant workforce correlate Sassen states that "global capital and new immigrant workforce are two major instances of transnationalized actors that . . . find themselves in contestation with each other inside global cities. Global cities are the sites of overvalorization of corporate capital and the devalorization of disadvantaged workers" (2008, 385).

The devalorization of human labor in relation to the overvalorization of global capital and capital in general is clearly shown in the following passage from Adiga describing the construction work in Delhi where “glass skeletons [are] being raised for malls or office blocks; rows of gigantic T-shaped concrete supports, like a line of anvils, where the new bridges or overpasses are coming up; huge craters [are] being dug for new mansions for the rich” (2008, 157). He compares one of the machines to a monster “with huge metal jaws alternately gorging and disgorging immense quantities of mud” and the workers to “creatures that had to obey it, men with troughs of mud on their heads [who] did not look bigger than mice” (Adiga 2008, 158), thus showing how not only devalorized but also dehumanized these workers are.

In order to try and compete with the neoliberal race for profit the poor are forced to surrender whatever talents, or property, they have. Roy illustrates this with the figure of the kathakali dancer:

The Kathakali Man is the most beautiful of men . . . but these days he has become unviable. Unfeasible. Condemned goods. . . . He cannot slide down the aisles of buses, counting change and selling tickets. He cannot answer bells that summon him. He cannot stoop behind trays of tea and Marie biscuits. In despair he turns to tourism. He enters the market. He hawks the only thing he owns. The stories that his body can tell. (1997, 230)

The dancer in this paragraph experiences not only an individual trauma, but also a cultural one through selling out his art to the corporate market. Roy’s subversive anti-corporate attitude is revealed in her deliberate use of vocabulary typical for the market oriented-age, such as unviable, unfeasible, condemned goods. Through this image she shows the individual traumas of many people who have become unfeasible in the global market of contemporary India.

## CONCLUSION

On the example of Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Adiga's *The White Tiger*, this paper has shown the Indian-English authors' treatment of the manifestations of environmental, cultural and individual trauma effected by abrupt changes in Indian society due to neo-liberal reforms, corporatization and the neo-colonial model of business and government. When these fictional accounts are compared with the factual detrimental effects of neocolonialism on the contemporary Indian society, it becomes evident that in this case fiction accurately reflects reality and provides a subversive critique of the neocolonial processes at hand.

All of the changes mentioned in this paper traumatize the individual by changing his environment, society, and culture to fit the free market of a globalized world. Thus the question arises when one is confronted with images of abject poverty, growing slums, fascism in the guise of nationalism, genocide, but also young call center workers whose real identities are not wanted in the market, apathetic youth crowding the shopping malls, depopulated rural areas and overpopulated cities, environmental disasters, and exploitation of natural and human resources in general is: how free does the free market make us people? And are the perfect credit rating and accolades from the imperial elites really worth that much?

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**ABSTRACT**

Since the advent of neoliberal capitalism and the liberalization of the Indian market, various Indian-English authors have criticized these neo-colonial processes in their novels, which depicted manifestations of the detrimental effects of neocolonialism on the environment, the culture, and the individual people. Through portraying these effects as trauma, authors provide a subversive critique of the abrupt changes in contemporary Indian society. This paper attempts to explore some of the manifestations of environmental, cultural and individual trauma in the novels of Arundhati Roy and Aravind Adiga.

**AUTHOR**

*Ksenija Švarc* is a Ph.D. student in “Literature and Cultural Identity” at Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, J. J. Strossmayer University of Osijek, Croatia.