

Economic Inequality and Environmental Degradation in 'The White Tiger' and 'The Glass Palace'.

Rashmi Ramesh Purke

Submitted: 22-Oct-2024 Revised: 28-Oct-2024 Accepted: 15-Nov-2024 Published: 31-Dec-2024



OPEN ACCESS



This work is licensed under a
Creative Commons Attribution
4.0 International

Abstract:

This paper explores the connection between economic inequality and environmental degradation as depicted in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga and *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh. Both novels illustrate how unequal distribution of wealth and power leads to environmental destruction and social injustice. Literature serves as a powerful medium to critique these issues, offering insight into how economic disparity fuels ecological harm.

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.15015856

Manuscript ID:
IJEWLPSIR-2024-010209

Volume: 1

Issue: 2

Month: December 2024

E-ISSN: 3065-7873

Assistant Professor Department
of English, Veer Wajekar ASC
College Phunde
Email:

rashmurke99@gmail.com

How to cite this article:
Purke, R. R. (2024). *Economic
Inequality and Environmental
Degradation in 'The White
Tiger' and 'The Glass Palace'*.
*International Journal of
English and World Languages
& Literature Paradigm Shift in
International Research*, 1(2),
37–40.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15015856>

Address for correspondence:

Assistant Professor Department
of English, Veer Wajekar ASC
College Phunde
Email: rashmurke99@gmail.com

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga portrays the protagonist Balam Halwai's journey from poverty to wealth within a corrupt system. His rise reflects the consequences of rapid urbanization and industrialization, which prioritize economic growth over environmental sustainability. The novel highlights the severe pollution, overcrowding, and waste management crises that disproportionately affect the poor, showing how economic inequality exacerbates environmental degradation.

Similarly, *The Glass Palace* by Ghosh situates environmental exploitation within a historical context, revealing the colonial extraction of natural resources, particularly in Burma's timber industry. The British imperialists' relentless pursuit of profit resulted in large-scale deforestation, disrupting local ecosystems and displacing indigenous communities. Through the experiences of various characters, Ghosh critiques the long-term socio-environmental damage caused by imperial greed.

By analyzing these two novels, this paper demonstrates how literature critiques the environmental consequences of economic disparities. Both works emphasize that economic inequality is not just a social issue but a catalyst for environmental destruction. The study argues that *The White Tiger* and *The Glass Palace* advocate for a more sustainable and equitable world by exposing the interconnectedness of wealth disparity, environmental exploitation, and social injustice. Through their narratives, Adiga and Ghosh call for a re-evaluation of progress, urging readers to consider the broader implications of economic policies on both human and ecological well-being.

Keywords: Economic Inequality, Environmental Degradation, Indian English Literature, Social and Ecological Justice

Introduction:

Economic inequality and environmental degradation are pressing global issues that are deeply interconnected. Literature, as a reflection of society, often critiques these challenges by portraying their impact on individuals and communities. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* are two Indian English novels that highlight the consequences of wealth disparity and ecological exploitation.

In *The White Tiger*, the protagonist's journey exposes how unbridled capitalism, urbanization, and corruption lead to environmental harm while widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Similarly, *The Glass Palace* sheds light on the exploitation of natural resources during British colonial rule, showing how imperialist policies prioritized profit over environmental and social well-being.

This paper examines how these novels critique the socio-economic systems that perpetuate environmental destruction and social injustice. By analyzing the intersection of economic inequality and environmental degradation in these texts, the study seeks to reveal the broader implications for society and the environment.

Economic Inequality:

Economic inequality, the unequal distribution of wealth, opportunities, and resources, is a recurring theme in literature, reflecting its deep-rooted impact on society.

In Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, this disparity is vividly depicted through the protagonist, Balram Halwai, who rises from poverty to wealth by navigating a corrupt and exploitative system. The novel exposes the stark contrast between the wealthy elite, who live in luxury, and the impoverished masses, who struggle to survive. Balram's journey reveals how systemic inequality forces individuals into morally ambiguous actions to escape oppression.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* presents economic inequality within a historical and colonial context. The novel explores how British imperialists exploited the natural resources and labor of colonized regions, enriching themselves while leaving local populations in poverty. Through characters who witness and endure this exploitation, Ghosh highlights the devastating effects of economic disparity, not only on individuals but also on communities and the environment.

Both novels illustrate how economic inequality perpetuates environmental and social injustice. In *The White Tiger*, the relentless pursuit of wealth drives urbanization and environmental degradation, further marginalizing the poor. In *The Glass Palace*, colonial resource extraction devastates ecosystems and displaces indigenous communities, leaving long-lasting scars.

These narratives show that economic inequality is more than a social issue; it fuels unsustainable practices that harm both people and the environment. By examining such literature, readers gain a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of wealth disparity, exploitation, and ecological destruction, urging critical reflection on these systemic issues.

Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation refers to the deterioration of natural ecosystems due to human activities, often driven by greed, exploitation, and unequal power dynamics. Literature frequently explores this theme, highlighting the destructive consequences of unsustainable practices. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* vividly portrays the environmental costs of rapid urbanization and industrialization in modern India. The polluted rivers, garbage-filled streets, and toxic air reflect the impact of unchecked economic growth, which prioritizes profit over ecological health. These environmental challenges disproportionately affect the poor, who lack the resources to escape their polluted surroundings.

In contrast, Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* situates environmental degradation within a colonial framework, where imperial powers exploit natural resources for economic gain. The novel depicts deforestation, particularly in Burma, as British colonizers extract timber without regard for the ecological consequences. This large-scale environmental destruction not only harms local communities but also disrupts cultural and ecological balances that have existed for centuries.

Both novels reveal how environmental degradation is intrinsically linked to economic inequality and exploitation. In *The White Tiger*, industrial pollution underscores the disparity between the wealthy elite, who live in cleaner, safer environments, and the poor, who bear the brunt of environmental harm. In *The Glass Palace*, colonial exploitation showcases how foreign powers prioritize short-term profits over sustainable practices, leaving a legacy of environmental damage.

By addressing environmental degradation, these works emphasize the urgent need for equitable and sustainable solutions that prioritize both human and ecological well-being. Literature, in this context, becomes a powerful tool for raising awareness about the interconnectedness of environmental and social issues.

Indian English Literature

Indian English Literature refers to literary works written in the English language by Indian authors, reflecting the rich diversity of India's culture, history, and social dynamics. It emerged during the British colonial period, with authors like Rabindranath Tagore and R. K. Narayan using English to express Indian thoughts and experiences. Over time, it has evolved, with contemporary writers addressing issues ranging from social inequality to environmental concerns, offering global readers insights into India's multifaceted identity.

In the context of *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga and *The Glass Palace* by Amitav Ghosh, Indian English literature becomes a lens through which readers can explore the socio-political realities of India, especially the themes of economic inequality and environmental degradation. Both authors employ English as a medium to critique modern Indian society's growing disparities and ecological issues, making these works accessible to an international audience while maintaining their Indian roots.

Adiga's *The White Tiger* delves into the grim realities of India's class divide, using a first-person narrative that exposes the deep-seated corruption, exploitation, and environmental pollution in urban India. The novel's straightforward style captures the voice of the marginalized, reflecting the grim realities of poverty and inequality. Through Balram's story, Adiga illustrates how environmental degradation is linked to the country's economic and social disparities, presenting a critique of the nation's rapid industrialization and urban growth.

Similarly, Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* explores historical and colonial exploitation, particularly through the lens of resource extraction and its long-term effects on the environment. The novel is set in British-occupied Burma and traces the lives of characters who experience both the exploitation of their land and the environmental destruction caused by colonial practices.

Ghosh's narrative emphasizes the role of imperialism in shaping not only the political and economic landscape of the region but also its environmental conditions.

Both works represent a modern strain of Indian English literature, where authors use the English language to express national issues, particularly those related to class, exploitation, and environmental justice. Indian English literature, through these novels, serves as an important platform for critiquing both historical injustices and contemporary societal challenges. In doing so, it helps bring the complexities of Indian society to a global stage, while maintaining a focus on its unique socio-political context.

Thus, Indian English literature continues to evolve as a powerful means of examining and confronting issues such as inequality and environmental degradation. Authors like Adiga and Ghosh contribute significantly to the genre, using the English language to bring India's urgent social and environmental issues into the global discourse.

Social and Ecological Justice

Social and ecological justice are two interconnected concepts that address the need for fair and equitable treatment of both people and the environment. Social justice focuses on ensuring that all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic background, race, or gender, have access to the resources, opportunities, and rights necessary for a dignified life. Ecological justice, on the other hand, emphasizes the fair distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, ensuring that no community suffers from environmental degradation while others thrive. Both concepts challenge the inequities that arise from exploitation, whether social, economic, or environmental, and advocate for a more sustainable and just world.

In literature, particularly in works like Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, social and ecological justice are explored through the lens of economic inequality, environmental degradation, and exploitation. These novels highlight how the marginalization of certain communities, particularly the poor and indigenous groups, is both a social and environmental issue. The stories presented in these works offer critical perspectives on how the systemic imbalance in society leads to the depletion of natural resources, harming those who are already disadvantaged.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga paints a bleak picture of India's social inequality, where the rich thrive in cities shielded from the ravages of pollution and waste, while the poor are left to suffer in overcrowded, polluted environments. Balram, the protagonist, experiences firsthand the environmental degradation of his village and the city, a direct consequence of unchecked industrialization that prioritizes economic growth over ecological balance. This reflects a broader issue of social and ecological injustice, where the poor bear the brunt of environmental damage caused by the affluent's greed and exploitation. Adiga critiques this social and ecological imbalance, urging readers to recognize that environmental degradation cannot be separated from social inequality.

In *The Glass Palace*, Ghosh also explores how the exploitation of resources during British colonial rule resulted in both social and ecological injustice. The novel focuses on the timber industry, where local communities in Burma were subjected to labor exploitation while their natural environment was being destroyed. Ghosh's depiction of the devastating effects of deforestation and resource extraction demonstrates how ecological justice is inherently linked to social justice. The indigenous population, whose lives and livelihoods were directly tied to the land, was displaced and disenfranchised, both socially and environmentally.

Both novels demonstrate the need for a holistic approach to justice—one that encompasses both social and ecological dimensions. They challenge readers to think about justice in a way that goes beyond human rights alone, extending to the rights of the environment and the recognition of how social inequality often leads to ecological harm. The works encourage a rethinking of development, urging a balance between progress and sustainability, and advocating for policies that ensure both social and ecological well-being.

Social and ecological justice are not isolated issues but are intricately connected in addressing the root causes of inequality and environmental degradation. Literature, as shown in *The White Tiger* and *The Glass Palace*, plays a critical role in raising awareness about the injustices that arise from the exploitation of both people and the environment. These works push for a more inclusive and just world where both social and ecological concerns are given equal importance.

Conclusion

In *The White Tiger* and *The Glass Palace*, both Aravind Adiga and Amitav Ghosh highlight the deep connection between economic inequality and environmental degradation. These novels illustrate how systemic exploitation harms both people and the environment, with marginalized communities bearing the brunt of these injustices. By exploring these interconnected issues, the works call for a more just and sustainable future, where social and ecological justice are prioritized. Indian English literature plays a vital role in raising awareness of these global challenges, urging us to act toward creating a fairer and more sustainable world for all.

Acknowledgments

Nil.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. Free Press, 2008.
2. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace*. HarperCollins, 2000.
3. Guha, Ramachandra. *Environmentalism: A Global History*. Longman, 1999.
4. Shiva, Vandana. *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development*. Zed Books, 1989.
5. Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Oxford University Press, 1983.
6. Sen, Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
7. Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. University of Chicago Press, 2021.
8. Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
9. Ghosh, Amitav. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. University of Chicago Press, 2016.
10. Baviskar, Amita. *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts Over Development in the Narmada Valley*. Oxford University Press, 2005.