

Urbanscapes and National Visions in Post-Millennial Indian English Fiction: Identities Renegotiated

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Santra, Sourav, and Mukesh Tiwari.

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Sourav Santra

Ph.D. Research Scholar (English)

C.V. Raman Global University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Dr. Mukesh Tiwari

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

C.V. Raman Global University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Abstract

The contemporary writers not only explore the rural setting of Indian suburbs but also experiment with new narrative techniques to capture the multifaceted realities of life in 21st-century India. In Reading New India, E. Dawson Varughese considers the role literature plays in shaping cultural understandings and representations of India both domestically and internationally. Taking into account issues such as globalization, modernity, identity, gender, class, and cultural hybridization, she also examines how Indian authors navigate and respond to them in contemporary Indian society. Through in-depth analysis of key works, these provide an insight into Indian English Fiction that reflects and shapes national consciousness, navigating complex issues of history, politics, and societal change. This article examines a rich exploration of the protagonists and representations of urban landscapes contributing to the construction and negotiation of national visions in contemporary Indian English Fiction. Furthermore, writers like Adiga, Chandra, and Roy use the urban setting to explore themes of globalization, westernization, consumerism, class divides, gender dynamics, and identity struggles faced by urban youth. Additionally, the chaos and alienation of city life is contrasted against nostalgic visions of peaceful rural life. Cities become symbolic spaces where age-old Indian values and customs collide with western ideas and lifestyles. The article explores how Indian fiction has moved beyond the notions of 'postcolonial' writing to reflect increasingly confident and diverse cultures by exploring the work of Aravind Adiga, Vikram Chandra, and Arundhati Roy reflecting the changing face of Indian cities and how urbanization reflects and shapes the national identity.

Keywords: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction, Identity Crisis, National Identity, Urbanscapes

While studying the historical context of post-millennial India, we often come across moments that are pregnant with possibilities; a period marked by significant social, political, cultural and identity transformations. As Varughese observes, a close reading “of the texts also look to offer insight and understanding into new Indian society through the explanation of key cultural terms, practices and events” (Varughese 21). In the ambience of South Asia, Post-millennial Indian English fiction has taken the portrayal of urban landscapes to new heights with its focus on the sociocultural and renegotiations of Indian cities. In postmodernist Indian English literature, the city has always played an important role in the narrative. In particular,

the works of authors like Aravind Adiga, Vikram Chandra, and Arundhati Roy have explored the darker avatars of Indian cities in the post-millennial era. *Selection Day* (2016) by Aravind Adiga focuses on the lives of two cricket-playing brothers from a lower-caste family in Mumbai. The novel accentuates the caste and class divides in Indian society and the role of sports in challenging these social hierarchies. *Sacred Games* (2006) explores the lives of a Sikh policeman, Sartaj Singh, and a powerful gangster, Ganesh Eknath Gaitonde, in the context of Mumbai's urban landscape. The novel reflects on the impact of urbanization on Indian society and the various national visions that shape the city's identity. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy features characters like Anjum, a transgender individual, who challenges traditional notions of gender and identity. The novel explores the complexities of identity formation in contemporary India, particularly in the context of gender and sexuality. Apart from these, Man Booker Prize winner Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), and *Last Man in Tower* (2011), also reflect the repercussions of globalization on contemporary society, with polarized protagonists who are products of globalization and share similar characteristics despite their differences. The recipient of prestigious Booker Prize, Roy wrote *The God of Small Things*, (1997) is a post-millennial Indian fiction in English that explores themes of caste, class, and the complexities of a multicultural society. The novel is set in the fictional town of Ayemenem in Kerala, India, and follows the story of a family torn apart by caste prejudice and the consequences of a forbidden love affair.

In post-millennial Indian English fiction, Indian writers are adopting and exploring the theoretical concepts of Western urban thinkers as well as Indian localized ideas. All of this points to the fact that urban spaces have acquired an equally strong symbolic affective meaning as the spaces of 'home' in the narratives of contemporary writers. Urban landscapes in post-millennial Indian English fiction are portrayed as spaces that provide shelter, comfort, longing for home, nostalgia, opportunity, fantasies, myth, fear, crime, alienation, enchantment, disease, corruption, excitement, claustrophobia, disorder, and threat to socio-political, religious and economic systems. The spatiality of city spaces is explored in relation to diasporic memory and nostalgia in post-millennial Indian English fiction. The role and impact of cities are vividly portrayed and projected in contemporary Indian literature. These often incorporate elements of realism, critical realism, and postmodernism to create complex narratology that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of people living in Nation today. Urbanization represents major shift that challenges conceptions of national identity that reflects cities are crucial sites for reimagining the Indian nation. Subsequently, novels don't simply celebrate or condemn urbanization, but explore its complexities. The tension between traditional and modern ways of life, as cities become more globalized and cosmopolitan while still retaining aspects of tradition. Most issues around class and inequality, with post-millennial novels contrasting the lives of the urban elite and wealthy with the struggles of the working class, migrants, and slum dwellers. The negotiation of national identity - what it means to be 'Indian' in a globalizing urban context. Contemporary writers like Aravind Adiga, Vikram Chandra, and Arundhati Roy etc. grapple with the diversity of urban populations.

Indian English fiction writings have evolved beyond the confines of 'postcolonial' writing to embrace a more confident and diverse cultural representation. Most postcolonial writers have looked into themes that emphasize a return to cultural roots, belief systems, and the celebration of multiculturalism. Authors like V.S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh, Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Jhumpa Lahiri and others have explored identity politics, the politics of difference, and recognition in their works, reflecting a commitment to revaluing marginalized identities. However, erudite writer like Shashi Tharoor have been instrumental in breathing new life into English literature by exploring themes of India's past and future, contributing to a vibrant literary landscape that reflects the country's rich cultural heritage and diversity.

Thus, Indian English fiction has transcended its postcolonial roots to embrace a more diverse and confident portrayal of Indian culture. Contemporary Indian writers are exploring a wide range of themes and styles that reflect the multifaceted nature of modern India, showcasing a rich tapestry of narratives that capture the essence of this vibrant and evolving society. Furthermore, study finds the evolution of Indian fiction beyond postcolonial constraints is evident in the exploration of diverse themes such as family dynamics, community life, gender issues, and cultural complexities. Works like *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga and *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy delve into these multifaceted aspects of Indian society, showcasing a more confident and diverse literary landscape. *The White Tiger* won the Man Booker Prize and critically probed the woes that plague modern India, combining realism, humour, and satire. Adiga's work captures the predicament of the have-nots in postcolonial India, which has been a central theme in Indian English literature. Booker Prize-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things*, dig into the intricacies of gender, caste, and societal expectations, offering a profound exploration of complex gender relationships within the Indian context; *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), reflects on the relationship between the aesthetic and the political in her work, questioning the term 'postcolonial' and exploring the complexities of colonialism and its aftermath. Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) explore gender issues within the Indian context, shedding light on the challenges and complexities faced by women in society. Shahnaz Bashir's *The Half Mother* (2014) explores into gender dynamics in Kashmir, portraying the lives of women amidst conflict and societal expectations, highlighting their resilience and struggles. Amitav Ghosh's novels are noted for their intense interweaving with history and their contributions to postcolonial literature. Through their narratives, these authors contribute to shaping national consciousness by reflecting on the intersection of cultural diversity and gender, historical legacies, political developments, and societal transformations within India.

Indian English fiction as a literary genre reflects and shapes national consciousness, navigating complex issues of history, gender, politics, and societal change. It provides insights into the evolution of Indian English fiction and its role in shaping national identity. Contemporary fiction is praised for its social substance, particularly in portraying the conflict between the individual and the community, and addressing political, social, and economic struggles. According to many critics, aesthetics, and violence within urban settings to offer nuanced portrayals of city life in contemporary English fiction. This is a deeper engagement with the complexities of urban landscapes and their impact on characters and narratives. Here, it is tenable to claim that stated above works portrays urban landscapes as a site of negotiation for national visions. Landscapes are not merely physical spaces but also symbolic constructs that reflect the social, cultural, and political realities of the time. The protagonists are often portrayed as agents of social change, navigating through the complexities of urban landscapes to challenge the status quo and advocate for a more equitable and inclusive society. It explores the hybrid nature of urban landscapes, where multiple cultural influences intersect and create new forms of identity. Characters of *Sacred Games* embody the tensions and contradictions of urban life, as well as the possibilities for individual growth and social change and the challenges of building a unified national identity. Simultaneously, contemporary English fiction critiques the urbanization and modernization processes in India, often highlighting the negative consequences such as social inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural erosion.

The rich observation of protagonists and representations of urban landscapes contributing to the construction and negotiation of national visions in contemporary Indian English fiction, we can consider characters like Inspector Sartaj Singh and Ganesh Gaitonde, Radha and Manju, Anjum/Aftab and Tilonavigate these landscapes, negotiating their identities and aspirations within the context of urban life.

It also explored through the lens of gender, as characters navigate the complexities of urban life while negotiating their roles and identities. Our studies found out that fiction has been instrumental in depicting the evolution and changes in the role, dreams, desires, and expectations of women in Indian society. This evolution has been reflected in the literature, which many times serves as a medium for women to express their needs and expectations. While studying, *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* by E. Dawson Varughese has examined how literature reflects and shapes cultural understandings and representations of India. Varughese considers the role of literature in reflecting the increasingly confident and diverse cultures of India, moving beyond notions of 'postcolonial' writing to engage with the socio-cultural landscape of New India. In accordance with her, contemporary "novel explores the physical upheaval that Mumbai faces today as well as the personal challenges of identity within the city's communities against a backdrop of New India" (Varughese 39). In the initial section of this book, it refers that there has been significant growth in Indian fiction published in English since 2000, reflecting the rise of 'New India' - an increasingly globalized, consumerist society. It aims to interrogate questions of 'Indianness' and identity in New India through analysis of select post-2000 fiction. It applies both extrinsic and intrinsic literary approaches. Extrinsicly, the book surveys broad trends in recently published fiction to gain sociological insights into contemporary Indian society. Intrinsicly, it conducts close readings of specific texts to examine how literary elements like character, plot, genre and voice construct the works as reflective of New India. In Chapter-II titled as 'Urban Scapes', discusses fictions set in the urban centres of tier-I or tier-II cities, which reflect the rapid changes occurring in these cities as part of 'New India'. The novels of Aravind Adiga, and Vikram Chandra reflect the complex, often conflicting identities emerging as people negotiate the interface between the local and the global. Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* is a richly layered novel that transcends the boundaries of a traditional crime thriller. It offers a profound exploration of the complexities of Indian society, addressing themes of corruption, violence, spirituality, and the struggle for power within the urban landscape of Mumbai. Through its intricate plot and deep characterizations, the novel provides a critical view point on the challenges facing contemporary India. The initial portion introduces a tense interaction between Sartaj Singh, a Sikh police inspector and a suspect, highlighting the gritty reality of police work in Mumbai, the finance capital of India. The novel's complexity is further illustrated through a detailed account of Sartaj Singh's investigation into Gaitonde's fortified bunker, leading to a dramatic confrontation that ends with Gaitonde's suicide. This event sets off a series of investigations that explored Gaitonde's past, revealing his rise in the criminal underworld, his ambitions, and his philosophical musings on life and death. Additionally, the novel includes acknowledgments, indicating a combination of fiction with real-life inspirations, as well as a *dramatis personae*, which explains the novel's cast of characters, including police officers, gangsters, and intelligence agents. As Ganesh Gaitonde stated about the city, "a thick black snake of smoke grew from a coastline settlement and twisted in towards the centre, towards another dark, curving fume – the city was burning" (Chandra 364). He presents Mumbai as a microcosm of contemporary Indian society, where the urban thicket is not just a physical space but also a metaphor for the entangled human tragedies that unfold within it. Vaugese says "Society is a microcosm of Indian society – the evolution of the building itself, ... 'cosmopolitan' building, the 'eczema of blue-skinned gods', are witness to this development – and yet, difference is underscored throughout the narrative" (Varughese 36). This provides a counterpoint to celebratory visions of a 'New India' and its global ambitions. At the same time, *Sacred Games* encompasses a multiplicity of identities and communities that make up the metropolis, reflect concern with how identities are being renegotiated in a rapidly changing India.

Selection Day is a novel by Aravind Adiga, the story revolves around two brothers, Radha and Manjunath Kumar, who are talented cricket players and live in Mumbai.

Their father, Mohan Kumar, is obsessed with making his sons successful cricket players and pushes them to their limits. The novel is divided into two parts, first part covers the events leading up to Selection Day, a crucial day when the boys will be selected for a prestigious cricket academy. And the second part takes place eleven years later and explores the aftermath of Selection Day and the choices made by the characters. The novel explores themes of family, identity, and the pressure to succeed in a highly competitive society. The story is narrated from the perspective of Manjunath, who is less passionate about cricket than his brother and struggles with his father's expectations. The complexities of Indian society, including issues of class, caste, and corruption and offering a nuanced exploration of urban landscapes and national visions through the lens of cricket, the most popular sports of India, a sport deeply embedded in the Indian psyche. This exploration of identity and national vision is indicative of a shift in Indian English fiction, moving beyond postcolonial narratives to address the complexities of India's diverse and evolving culture. This statement creates an atmosphere of confusion and disorder, "The old man kept shouting; a passing bike-rider slowed and said something to him; then a breeze wafted the smell of shit everywhere: the uninterpretable madness of the urban night surrounded the brothers Kumar" said Radha (Adiga 263). Apart from that, the urbanscape is vividly portrayed through the character of Anjum, a transgender woman, who embodies the existential precarity faced by the hijra (transgender) community. Anjum's life in the bustling city of Delhi reflects the broader societal attitudes towards transgender individuals and the struggle for acceptance and space within the urban milieu. Arundhati Roy in her novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* explores the complexities of urban landscapes and national visions in post-millennial Indian English fiction by renegotiating identities through its diverse cast of characters and their intersecting stories. One of the central themes of the novel is the struggle for identity and belonging in a society that often marginalizes and excludes those who are different. Throughout this book, Anjum's experiences as a transgender woman are depicted with sensitivity and nuance, highlighting the difficulties she faces in a society that has not always accepted or understood her. The diverse characters in the novel, from hijras and political rebels to women challenging societal norms, enriches the exploration of urban spaces and national identities. Most of the characters, through their struggles and resilience, carve out new spaces for themselves, defying conventional roles and experimenting with new forms of living and being. One of the character, Saddam Hussain stated that 'Who gave these Hijras permission to sit here? Which of these Struggles do they belong to?' (Roy 119) - this statement reflects attitudes of discrimination, exclusion, and a lack of recognition of the rights and identities of marginalized communities. Furthermore, the novel's exploration of political and gender issues, through the lens of characters who exist on the fringes of society, underscores the renegotiation of identities in the face of changing urban and national landscapes. Challenging the mainstream discourse on Indianness, this is in line with the emerging canon of post-millennial Indian dystopian fiction, which focuses on themes of precarity and (im)purity.

The national visions of India have left a significant imprint on Indian English fiction, particularly in the depiction of urban spaces, E. Dawson Varughese also discussed the same idea in her book. These national visions reflect contemporary concerns of city life, and are often reflected in literary works. Over the past fifteen years, English fiction has trended towards the portrayal of "Urban Underbellies", which reveals a darker, grittier side of urban living in India. Such depictions of urban spaces are a response to the national visions that seek to address the challenges of urbanization, such as poverty, crime, and inadequate infrastructure and so on. Additionally, these descriptions instruct the reader to think critically about the broader social issues that affect the country as a whole, and to awaken them to the realities of urban life. Urban spaces are therefore not just physical surroundings but also a significant aspect of one's identity, with the representations of these spaces reflecting the renegotiation of identities. English fiction offers a unique perspective on the urban spaces of India, such as by echoing contemporary concerns about living in an urban environment and

urbanization, and it is an important contribution to the broader discussion about national identity and urbanization in India. The context in which literary fiction is read and cultivated is also crucial to understanding how national visions influence the depiction of urban spaces in English fiction. Ultimately, the complexities of contemporary Indian society are explored through Indian English fiction, and urbanization's challenges and opportunities are brought to light.

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