



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 12. Issue.1. 2025 (Jan-March)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

The Politics of the Booker Prize: A Case Study of Aravind Adiga's
The White Tiger

Ravi Kumar

Research Scholar, Department of English, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Nalanda, Bihar.
Email: 26ravikumar91@gmail.com

[doi: 10.33329/ijelr.12.1.81](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.12.1.81)



Article information

Article Received:11/02/2025
Article Accepted:04/03/2025
Published online:18/03/2025

ABSTRACT

The instant popularity of *The White Tiger*, after it won the Booker Prize, has sparked significant interest among critics and scholars who are delving into the various factors contributing to its widespread appeal. These experts particularly examine how the Booker Prize label has influenced the book's success and what it means for a novel's readership when recognized by such a prestigious award. The novel's rapid ascent in popularity post-award has raised questions about how much of its success can be attributed to the Booker Prize itself and how much is linked to the inherent quality or topical relevance of the novel. Critics are not only analysing the benefits the Booker Prize confers on a book in terms of sales and visibility but also the broader public reception it receives following the announcement. While the prize offers significant exposure, there are also critical evaluations of the Booker jury's selections. Some critics question whether personal biases or political agendas influence the jury's decisions, and if certain voices or types of literature are favored over others, possibly due to prevailing literary trends or social considerations. This article aims to delve into the politics involved in the selection process, offering insights into the complex relationship between literary recognition, market success, and the subjective nature of literary awards. Through this exploration, the article will attempt to unravel the layers behind the novel's popularity and the larger implications of the Booker Prize in the literary world.

Keywords: Booker-winning Prejudice Readerships Book-sales Politics.

The Booker Prize, one of the most esteemed literary honours, is supposedly a beacon of excellence in the world of literature for several decades. Established in 1969, the prize aims to recognize outstanding works of fiction penned in the English language by authors from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Commonwealth nations. Named after its original sponsor, Booker McConnell Ltd., the award's illustrious history is marked by a tradition of celebrating literary brilliance and fostering a diverse array of voices.

The award has an established process. Each year, a panel of eminent judges goes through the submitted books and selects a longlist, followed by a shortlist of exceptional novels that captivate readers and challenge literary norms. It is conveyed by the panel that the shortlisted works encompass a remarkable tapestry of genres, themes, and narrative styles, reflecting the richness and versatility of contemporary literature.

However, there are varied responses from some of the leading authors and critics about the impact of the Booker Prize on the overall impression of a book and the author thereafter. In one of the articles published in *The Guardian*, it is argued that the ultimate recipient of the Booker Prize not only garners international acclaim and prestige but also witnesses a remarkable surge in book sales, reaching audiences far beyond the literary community (*Marsh*). In this comment, it can be read between the lines that the audience for the kind of books that make it to the shortlists (or eventually win) of such awards is limited. And winning the award exposes the book (and the author) to a whole new world of readers that is generally beyond the elite literary circles.

In a *The Guardian* article, it is argued that Booker Prize-winning books receive prominent shelf placements and displays in bookstores, as booksellers do intend to capitalize on the award's reputation to promote the book to their customers and thus make more money for themselves, the publishers and the author as well (*Flood*). Likewise, *Live Mint* reported that only after the announcement of inclusion of Adiga's debut novel on the shortlist of the Booker Prize for 2008, there was a surge in the sales figure and it went on high after the book was announced as the winner of the prize (*Sharma*).

Therefore, it can certainly be established that the Booker Prize can indeed influence the buying choices of readers. Many readers actively seek out and read books that have won or been shortlisted for the prize, as they consider it a mark of excellence. Bookstores often prominently display Booker Prize-winning books, further increasing their visibility and attracting potential readers. And all this pomp can, at times, work as a band aid and hide the lack of literary merit, substance and linguistic shortcomings of a work of literature.

It is no secret that literary awards play a crucial role in recognising and promoting outstanding works of literature. However, at the same time, they are not fool proof indicators of a novel's literary qualities. Factors such as subjectivity, changing trends, marketability, and limitations in representation can influence the outcome of literary awards. And therefore, there have been numerous instances of critics and readers criticising works even after they have received prestigious literary awards such as the Booker Prize for Literature. It is, thus, apparent that merit in literature can exist beyond the scope of accolades, and that every book, regardless of awards, may have its own unique strengths and shortcomings.

Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" can be analysed by identifying certain aspects that depict the negative portrayal of India. The author incorporated certain irrelevant issues into the narrative that do not accurately represent the country's image. Adiga intentionally emphasized India's flaws by exaggerating these issues to persuade the readers to believe on the readymade truths. The novelist focuses on the negative aspects of the nation, the author aims to create a distorted perception of India among readers, who may be unaware of the country's actual reality. These points can be summarized as follows:

1. Stereotypical Characterisation:

Some leading literary critics argued that some characters in the novel, particularly Balram Halwai, the protagonist, were portrayed in a stereotypical manner, perpetuating clichéd representations of poverty and social class in India. Balram, as the "dark" or "white tiger" figure, is depicted as an exception to the norm, reinforcing the notion that upward mobility is only possible through cunning or exceptional circumstances. Now, when we think in this direction, we may tend to

making a conclusion, which might be premature, that Adiga may have tried to establish that Indians from the poor and penniless strata of the society may rise to prominence, affluence, and prestige only by taking a path that must lack morality, values, and righteousness:

You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?" I thought about it and said: "The white tiger." "That's what you are, in this jungle. (The White Tiger 5)

In the novel "The White Tiger", the character of Balram Halwai is portrayed as cunning and his cunningness is glorified, suggesting that one must be cunning to become successful in terms of wealth and property. However, this portrayal is problematic as it presents a negative stereotype of common people. The generalization of Balram's character, who is an exception in real society, is a concern, as readers in India may perceive him as a member of real society and distance themselves from reality. Additionally, foreign readers who view India through colonial lenses want to see India enveloped with dust and dull. In pursuit of foreign favour, the novelist presents India that resonates with them.

However, one may ask, out of curiosity, was the story of Balram Halwai awarded the Booker Prize or the notion of the British that Indians do not have necessary merit and grit to rise from the depths of poverty and penury?

2. Lack of Nuanced Portrayals:

The novel presents a one-sided and simplistic view of India's socioeconomic disparities, overlooking the complexity of its diverse population and cultures. Some readers felt that the portrayal of the poor as completely oppressed and the rich as uniformly exploitative lacked nuance, failing to explore the multifaceted nature of the Indian society.

Adiga's perspective on India and its inhabitants appears bleak. He characterises Indian people in a negative light. According to his depiction, the population can be divided into two groups: those with large stomachs and those with small ones. He asserts that the former consumes the latter. However, it is important to note that this portrayal cannot be generalized to the entire Indian population. Except for such instances, the majority of the population in the real world is not depicted in the novel. Many individuals can extend their helping hands to those in need. Moreover, those who possess exceptional abilities often consider themselves responsible citizens. Adiga's message, as conveyed in these lines, is detrimental to the nation's progress:

To sum up – in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up. (The White Tiger 64)

3. Oversimplification of Corruption:

Some readers found the novel's depiction of corruption and the exploitation of the poor to be oversimplified and lacking in depth, failing to explore the root causes of these issues. The novelist points out many drawbacks in India by presenting the picture of India as such a place where the lives of people undergo very bad experiences. He highlighted problematic side of the nation without sharing a bit of cause of the problems. Readers find that the novel's narrative often present corruption as inherent to Indian society, rather than examining the systemic factors that perpetuate such practices. Adiga seems frown in his selective approach to social disparity and leave the other side untouched. He avoids to present the image of better India that will encourage such people who hope for best in their life.

4. Lack of Empathy for Characters:

The protagonist, Balram Halwai, lacks depth and empathy, making it challenging for readers to connect with him as a protagonist. Some readers felt that Balram's character lacked the complexity needed for readers to fully engage with his journey and struggles. Readers find the character superficial and unnatural in the light of the realistic portrayal of the protagonist. It seems that the novelist tries to allure the readers by presenting such a character who adopts shortcuts to achieve success. On the contrary, readers do not resonate with the character without idealistic ground in his life.

It would have a better choice for the novelist in the portrayal of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, to take a transformative journey from a criminal mindset to a person of pacified temperament. Downtrodden class people like Balram are better able to gradually attain the heights of success by struggling with themselves. In this way, Halwai remains dear to millions of hearts than remembered for his criminal acts and mischievous beings throughout his life.

5. Narrative Structure:

The narrative style, presented as a letter written by Balram to the Chinese Premier. There are eight chapters that encompass a series of letters, with the titles as *The First Night*, *The Second Night*, *The Fourth Morning*, *The Fourth Night*, *The Fifth Night*, *The Sixth Morning*, *The Sixth Night* and *The Seventh Night*. The story narrated by the protagonist in first person by going back reversely from present day to his early life sequentially. The story begins with Ashok Sharma, formerly also known as Balram Halwai and Munna in his childhood.

Critics contended that this epistolary format seemed artificial as the novelist employed one way communication, the speaker does not wait for the responses from the listener. It seems that the novelist through the Balram want to convey his message perpetually, whether the message is engaging or uninteresting for the listener:

The White Tiger is a single sided conversation. The speaker does not wait for the response of the listener. Like the Ancient Mariner in S. T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* Balram catches his guest reader and goes on narrating his story including his feelings and emotions without waiting to listen to the responses of the listener. (Mishra and Kumar)

6. Stereotypes About Western Influence:

The novel occasionally perpetuated stereotypes about western influence in India, portraying westerners as uniformly exploitative. Some argued that this portrayal oversimplified the complexities of India's relationship with the West.

Through the story, Adiga aims to depict India's conditions more favourably during British rule. He refers to free India as a "jungle" and its inhabitants as animals, with attaining freedom analogous to opening a cage. He presents the laws implemented in India before independence as the *zoo law*, which is subsequently replaced by the *jungle law*. This dichotomy serves as a subject of severe critique as it diminishes India's image. The novelist has some certain motives behind such unexpected illustrations.

On the fifteenth of August, 1947 – the day the British left – the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. (The White Tiger 38)

Impact of Winning the Booker Prize on Reader Opinions:

Winning the Booker Prize in 2008 brought significant attention and recognition to *The White Tiger*. The prestigious award elevated the novel's status, leading to increased readership and global exposure. Many readers who may not have initially considered the book were drawn to it due to its accolades.

The Booker Prize's recognition also sparked discussions and debates about the novel's merits, with both critics and supporters expressing their opinions. Some readers who had not previously paid attention to the book may have been more inclined to give it a chance, inspired by its literary achievement.

On the other hand, winning the Booker Prize also intensified the scrutiny of the novel's shortcomings and criticisms. The increased attention brought by the award led to more thorough analyses and discussions of its narrative choices, characterizations, and thematic representations.

Impact of Booker Awards on Book Marketing

The Booker award has been a prestigious award in the realm of literature for several decades. The recipients of this literary honour have Booker labels that add an extra dimension to their popularity. The name and fame they get just after the announcement of selected winners for a certain title of the books. It is noticed that Booker-winning status brought many happy moments for the author. The book with the label of Booker brings a lot of readers, hence surge the number of copies in the wish-list or carts for the book. There are two benefits of being a Booker winner: first, selling of the books in large numbers, and second, the face value of the author in the literary circle and outside it earns many indirect benefits. Here is the CintSnap Survey, a tool designed to survey individuals and understand their opinions. The team conducted a poll with approximately 300 people from the UK to learn about their reading habits, how they read, and what persuades them to select a new title. Does the Booker Prize matter in terms of readership? Here is an analysis of the impact of the Booker Prize on audiences:

Prizes like the Booker might have the power to turn a relatively little known author into a household name overnight, but does seeing a 'Shortlisted' sticker slapped on the front cover of a paperback actually persuade the average consumer to put their hand in their pockets? Just over half those surveyed noted that a book being shortlisted for a literary prize would make them somewhat (32%) or very likely to go out and purchase said title. Around a quarter of respondents (28%) felt completely neutral about the whole thing, while 16% were very or somewhat unlikely to be swayed. (Patricia Petrat 2024)

Although Petrat is reluctant to acknowledge the impact of the Booker Prize in popularizing authors overnight, the sales figures silently speak volumes about the immense success an author can experience in a short time. She asserts that it is the cover of the book that attracts the most readers to buy it. However, she remains ambivalent regarding the influence of the prize in changing an author's life.

In the case of "The White Tiger", the novel became famous overnight across the world, causing its sales to soar to incredible heights. Before the Booker Prize, the book sold around 400 copies per week, but during Booker week, sales surged to more than 8,000 copies. These sales figures alone are enough to measure the impact of the Booker Prize on a novelist's career. Litro Online speaks about the recognition that comes with the Booker award:

Winning the Booker Prize is a coveted accolade that brings instant recognition and validation to authors. The prize catapults writers into the literary spotlight, often resulting in increased book sales and a broader readership. This recognition is particularly crucial for emerging voices and can significantly influence a writer's career trajectory. (Litro Online 2023)

Litro Online brings the fact that not only instant recognition and large audiences, but also plays crucial role in a writer's career.

Therefore, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that the Booker Prize influences the buying choices of readers. Most readers are guided by prejudiced thought that a book with a Booker must have an outstanding work; for them, a book with the status of a Booker prize is a mark of excellence.

Publishers, bookshops, and bookstalls arrange a separate shelf for the prize-winning books that brings maximum visibility and attracts more potential readers than the other books of the shops. These all pomp and show works as aid to the popularity of the book and hide the lack of literary merit and linguistic shortcomings of a work of literature.

In the public domain, literary awards and prizes play a vital role in promoting and recognising a literary work. However, this is not fact that literary accolades are only indicators of literary qualities of a novel. The influence of literary awards can be manipulated in terms of subjectivity, limitation in representation, and marketability. Therefore, now-adays, many readers and critics with an open mind criticise the works even if they have prestigious awards, such as the Booker Prize for Literature. Thus, it is quite open that literary merit in a work of literature is beyond the awards and prizes; every work of literature has its own unique ideas and drawbacks.

Overall, winning the Booker Prize for literature transformed "The White Tiger" from a relatively unknown debut novel into a globally celebrated work. While it garnered both praise and criticism, the award's influence ensured that the book remained a subject of discussion and contemplation among readers and literary enthusiasts worldwide. The resulting discussions and critical approaches to the text raise another point of debate regarding the selection of the novel for the Booker Prize. Many critics have argued that the panel of judges is guided by certain biases that affect their fair judgment. Some literary scholars have gone as far as claiming that the jury members cater to a colonial mindset. Additionally, there are claims that business strategies play a role in these decisions.

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