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Voices of a Changing India: A Comparative Study of Rhetorical Styles in
Aravind Adiga and Vikram Seth

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Abstract

This paper examines the comparative rhetorical styles of Aravind Adiga and Vikram Seth, two prominent contemporary Indian authors. Through their major works—*The White Tiger* and *A Suitable Boy*—both authors showcase distinct narrative techniques and rhetorical approaches to storytelling. Adiga employs a sharp, often satirical tone to critique societal hierarchies and the dark undercurrents of modern India, using first-person narration to immerse readers in the protagonist's complex psyche. In contrast, Seth's expansive, lyrical prose in *A Suitable Boy* captures the intricacies of Indian society, employing rich imagery and multi-layered characterization to explore themes of family, politics, and personal ambition. Both writers employ their craft to provoke thought on societal reforms, yet their stylistic approaches—Adiga's directness versus Seth's nuanced depth—offer contrasting yet complementary lenses on India's evolving cultural landscape.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, Vikram Seth, Rhetorical Styles, Contemporary Indian Fiction, Narrative Techniques, Societal Reforms, Storytelling

Introduction

The emergence of contemporary Indian literature in the global arena has brought forth voices that reflect the sociopolitical transformations of a rapidly changing nation. Among these voices, Aravind Adiga and Vikram Seth stand out due to their distinct literary styles and thematic concerns. Both authors engage with the socio-political complexities of post-independence India, though their rhetorical approaches differ significantly, shaping how their works impact readers. Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) showcase two contrasting styles—one direct and satirical, the other expansive and panoramic. This comparative study explores the rhetorical strategies employed by Adiga and Seth, examining how their narrative structures, linguistic techniques, thematic explorations, and engagement with readers shape their portrayals of a changing India.

Literature Review

Contemporary Indian fiction's rhetorical impact has garnered substantial scholarly attention, particularly regarding how these texts challenge social norms and critique postcolonial legacies. Scholars like Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) and Priyamvada Gopal (2009) highlight the innovative narrative techniques employed by Indian writers to disrupt conventional storytelling structures and foreground issues of social justice. Mukherjee (2000) argues that contemporary Indian fiction often undermines linear storytelling, reflecting the fragmented nature of postcolonial realities. She observes,

"The postcolonial Indian novel undermines the linear progression of time, offering a narrative that mirrors the disjointedness of the nation's collective and individual histories" (Mukherjee, 2000, p. 88).

This narrative fragmentation is especially evident in Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, where multiple perspectives and intersecting storylines offer a panoramic view of post-independence India. Gopal (2009) observes,

"Seth's sprawling narrative attempts to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of Indian society in the postcolonial era" (Gopal, 2009, p. 114).

In contrast, Adiga's *The White Tiger* adopts a more direct, confrontational rhetorical strategy through satire and the confessional epistolary format. Ulka Anjaria (2012) notes that Adiga's novel

"Invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the moral decay within Indian society, exposing the hypocrisy and corruption at every level of the social structure" (Anjaria, 2012, p. 141).

Adiga's protagonist, Balram Halwai, engages readers through his letters, highlighting systemic exploitation and the corrosive impact of class structures. As Adiga writes,

"The poor are often invisible, but they are the ones who suffer most" (Adiga, 2008, p. 143),

echoing the novel's emphasis on the voicelessness of marginalized communities. Through this rhetorical choice, readers are compelled to confront the ethical space created by ambition and social mobility.

Furthermore, the language used in contemporary Indian fiction plays a crucial role in the rhetorical strategies of both Adiga and Seth. As Salman Rushdie (1991) notes, postcolonial writers blend English with native vernaculars to subvert colonial linguistic hierarchies. Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a prime example of this technique, with its use of phonetic spellings and Malayalam idioms, engaging actively with India's postcolonial cultural realities (Ahmad, 1994). In contrast, Seth's *A Suitable Boy* maintains a more formal prose style that, according to Makarand Paranjape (2004),

"Reinforces the tension between modernity and tradition, suggesting that India's journey towards modernity is inevitably intertwined with its colonial past" (Paranjape, 2004, p. 219).

This stylistic choice reflects Seth's engagement with India's evolving identity, balancing historical realism with a deeper exploration of personal and societal ambitions.

Both Adiga and Seth illustrate how contemporary Indian fiction fosters ethical engagement and critical reflection through rhetorical complexity. Reader-response theorists Wolfgang Iser (1978) and Stanley Fish (1980) emphasize that literature shapes meaning through the interpretative interaction between the reader and the text. Iser (1978) suggests,

"Literature is not a mirror of reality but a space where meaning is negotiated between the text and the reader" (Iser, 1978, p. 51).

Through the fragmented narrative of *The God of Small Things*, the satirical confessions in *The White Tiger*, and the panoramic structure of *A Suitable Boy*, these novels engage readers on both emotional and intellectual levels, urging them to reconsider their perceptions of social hierarchies and postcolonial identity. Fish (1980) elaborates further, stating that

“Texts like *The White Tiger* compel readers to grapple with moral questions, making them active participants in the ethical dialogue of the novel” (Fish, 1980, p. 118).

These rhetorical strategies invite readers to critically reflect on their roles within India’s evolving socio-political landscape.

Rhetorical Approach and Narrative Voice

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*

Adiga’s *The White Tiger* adopts a first-person epistolary form, where the protagonist, Balram Halwai, addresses the Chinese Premier through a series of letters, creating an intimate yet confrontational narrative. This personal and confessional style allows Balram’s voice to dominate the text, offering readers an unapologetic, biased, and morally ambiguous perspective. The rhetorical effect is immediate and forceful, as Balram directly engages readers, challenging them to confront uncomfortable truths about class disparity, corruption, and the human cost of economic progress.

For example, Balram’s sarcastic commentary about India’s technological gap highlights the deep inequality between the rich and the poor:

“You see, the rich don’t have drivers in China. They have robots. But in India, we still have the human touch” (Adiga, *The White Tiger*, Chapter 2).

This sharp irony critiques both the technological gap and the entrenched class system in India. The rhetorical effect underscores Balram’s resentment toward the elitist class while revealing the stark contrasts between nations.

In another example, Balram justifies his violent actions by framing them as a personal escape:

“In the end, I was not so much a man who killed for money, but a man who killed to escape” (Adiga, *The White Tiger*, Chapter 18).

This moment complicates the reader’s moral judgment, as it reframes murder as a form of liberation from an oppressive society, challenging readers to reconsider their views on morality and justice.

Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*

In contrast, Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* utilizes an omniscient third-person narrative voice, which provides a broad, neutral perspective. This structure enables the novel to unfold from multiple viewpoints, offering readers a panoramic portrait of post-independence India. Through the omniscient narrator, Seth intricately balances the personal and political, capturing the complex interplay between individual desires and societal pressures.

For example, Seth explores Lata’s internal conflict over her marriage choice:

“Lata found herself in a world that did not seem to mind whether she loved or did not love, so long as she obeyed. Love was a minor consideration. Duty was paramount” (Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, Chapter 24).

This moment emphasizes the tension between personal desires and societal expectations, framed within the broader context of India’s cultural and political complexities.

Conclusion

Both Adiga and Seth offer compelling critiques of contemporary India, but their rhetorical styles serve distinct purposes. Adiga's *The White Tiger* uses direct, confrontational language to challenge readers to question the moral and social underpinnings of India's class system. Conversely, Seth's *A Suitable Boy* provides a more nuanced, expansive view of post-independence India, blending personal journeys with historical and political themes.

The rhetorical strategies of Adiga and Seth reflect the diverse ways in which contemporary Indian literature responds to the challenges of a rapidly changing India. By engaging with the country's past, present, and future, their works provide unique perspectives on the intersections of modernity, identity, and societal transformation, offering valuable insights for postcolonial studies

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Swaima Ahmad is an educator, researcher, and transformational trainer pursuing a Ph.D. in English Literature. Founder of Finesse Academy, she's led 3,000+ workshops globally. A Gold Medallist and certified NLP practitioner, she integrates literature, leadership, and communication to inspire purposeful action, academic growth, and social impact