Fractured Foundations: Caste, Class, and the Persistence of Inequality in Booker Prize-Winning Indian Fiction

A Comparative Study of Booker Prize-Winning Indian Novels in English

C. Madanna
Research Scholar, Department of English
Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa,
Andhra Pradesh, India
Email: madhupcvreddy@gmail.com

Prof. P. Padma
Professor, Department of English
Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa,
Andhra Pradesh, India

Abstract

The present paper undertakes a systematic and comparative analysis of four landmark Booker Prize-winning novels from the Indian literary tradition in English — Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981), Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things (1997), Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss (2006), and Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) — to examine how each text constructs, contests, and transmits a distinctive image of India through the prisms of caste, class, and social stratification. The four novels, spanning nearly three decades of postcolonial literary production, constitute a significant corpus that collectively charts the fault lines of inequality embedded in Indian social architecture. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital, B.R. Ambedkar's critique of caste, and Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory of subjugation, the study analyses how these authors employ narrative technique, characterization, language, and symbolic imagery to expose the structural mechanisms of domination and marginalization. The paper argues that while Rushdie interrogates the mythologization of national identity against the backdrop of political and communal upheaval, Roy lays bare the violence encrypted in the caste system through the grammar of forbidden love. Desai situates class and postcolonial anxiety within the global dynamics of migration and cultural dislocation, while Adiga deploys the Bildungsroman tradition to dramatize the predatory capitalism and caste complicity that governs contemporary India. Together, these novels reveal that social hierarchies in India are not static relics of tradition but are continuously reproduced through language, law, institutional structures, and everyday social practice. The study ultimately demonstrates that Booker Prize-winning Indian fiction in English functions not merely as aesthetic achievement but as a sustained socio-political critique of the architectonics of inequality.

Keywords: Caste, Class, Social Hierarchy, Hegemony and Subaltern.

1. Introduction

The question of social inequality has long occupied a central position in the literary imaginations of writers who negotiate the complexities of the Indian subcontinent. Literature, as a site of cultural production, does not merely reflect social reality — it participates actively in constructing, challenging, and sometimes reproducing the hierarchies that organize human life. In no other national literary tradition is this more starkly evident than in Indian writing in English, particularly among those texts that have achieved international recognition through the Booker Prize. The four novels examined in this paper — Midnight's Children, The God of Small Things, The Inheritance of Loss, and The White Tiger — represent not simply aesthetic landmarks but critical engagements with the lived experience of inequality in South Asia.

India's social architecture is among the most stratified in the world. Caste, that uniquely South Asian institution of hierarchical social organization, intersects with class, religion, gender, and region to produce a dense matrix of privilege and deprivation. As B.R. Ambedkar observed, caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers — a system that ascribes permanent social meaning to birth and denies individuals the possibility of self-determination (Ambedkar, 1936). The postcolonial condition has compounded these inherited structures, layering colonial legacies of race and class upon pre-existing caste hierarchies, and producing what Partha Chatterjee (1993) calls the paradox of a nationalist modernity that promises equality while perpetuating exclusion.

The literary texts under examination engage this paradox with varying degrees of irony, despair, anger, and hope. Rushdie's sprawling novel uses the magical-realist mode to question the very narrative of national progress that the Indian state constructed upon independence. Roy's spare, lyrical prose exposes the terror concealed within the ordinary routines of caste compliance. Desai's transnational narrative locates Indian social anxiety within the broader postcolonial crisis of belonging, while Adiga's satirical epistolary novel strips away the rhetoric of the Indian economic miracle to reveal the brutality underlying upward mobility. Together, they constitute a powerful indictment of the social hierarchies that continue to define Indian experience.

This paper proceeds through a comparative close reading of each novel, organized thematically around the central concerns of caste, class, and the reproduction of inequality. It draws upon a range of theoretical frameworks — from Gramsci's concept of hegemony to Bourdieu's sociology of distinction, from Ambedkar's radical critique of caste to Fanon's analysis of colonized

subjectivity — to illuminate the mechanisms through which social hierarchies are constructed, maintained, and occasionally disrupted in these texts. The aim is not simply to document the presence of inequality in these novels, but to understand the literary and ideological work they perform in representing and contesting the architecture of Indian social life.

2. Theoretical Framework: Reading Inequality through Literary Lenses

Any serious engagement with the theme of social hierarchy in literature must be grounded in a coherent theoretical framework capable of accounting for the complex articulations of caste and class in the postcolonial South Asian context. This paper draws upon several complementary theoretical traditions that, taken together, provide the conceptual tools necessary for the readings that follow.

2.1 Gramsci's Hegemony and the Consent to Inequality

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony — the process by which dominant groups secure the voluntary consent of subordinate groups to their own domination through the dissemination of ideas, values, and cultural norms — provides a crucial starting point for understanding how social hierarchies reproduce themselves (Gramsci, 1971). In all four novels, characters from marginalized communities are shown not merely to suffer under systems of oppression but frequently to internalize and reproduce the values that sustain their own subordination. This internalization of hegemonic values is a key mechanism through which the architecture of inequality maintains its stability.

2.2 Bourdieu's Social Capital and Cultural Distinction

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of practice, particularly his concepts of social, cultural, and economic capital and his analysis of the field of cultural production, offers a valuable framework for understanding how inequality is reproduced through everyday social practices rather than simply through overt coercion (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu's notion of habitus — the set of durable dispositions through which individuals navigate their social worlds — helps explain why characters in these novels so often reproduce the conditions of their own subjugation even when they possess the awareness to recognize those conditions for what they are.

2.3 Ambedkar's Critique of Caste

B.R. Ambedkar's foundational critique of the caste system as a social institution that operates through the regulation of endogamy, the denial of social mobility, and the ideological sanctification of untouchability remains indispensable for any reading of caste in Indian literature (Ambedkar,

1936). Ambedkar's insistence that caste cannot be abolished through mere reform but requires a thoroughgoing transformation of the social and ideological structures that produce it resonates powerfully with the narrative logic of Roy's novel in particular, where the attempt to transgress caste boundaries is met with catastrophic violence.

2.4 Fanon, Postcoloniality, and Internalized Oppression

Frantz Fanon's analysis of the psychic damage inflicted by colonialism and racial subjugation — particularly his account of how colonized subjects internalize the image of themselves as inferior, as constructed by the colonial gaze — offers important insights into the postcolonial condition as dramatized in all four novels (Fanon, 1963). Desai's work is particularly saturated with the Fanonian problematic of colonial mimicry and its costs, while Adiga's narrator Balram Halwai represents a peculiarly postcolonial figure: the subaltern who has absorbed and weaponized the logic of the dominant order in order to escape it.

3. Midnight's Children (1981): Nation, Myth, and the Hierarchies of History

Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, winner of the Booker Prize in 1981 and subsequently awarded the Booker of Bookers in 1993 and 2008, represents arguably the most ambitious literary engagement with the idea of India as a nation-state. The novel's famous conceit — that the 1,001 children born in the first hour of Indian independence each receive supernatural gifts proportional to the proximity of their birth to the midnight moment — functions as an extended metaphor for the hierarchical distribution of opportunity and power in the postcolonial nation (Rushdie, 1981).

Rushdie's India is a nation stratified not only by the pre-existing hierarchies of caste, class, and religion but by the new hierarchies of political power and historical privilege that independence itself produces. The protagonist Saleem Sinai, born into a bourgeois Muslim family in Bombay, occupies a peculiar position within this new hierarchy: endowed with the gift of telepathy, he becomes a kind of national allegory, his personal history intertwined with the history of the nation in ways that expose the constructed and contested nature of both. The novel's magical realism — which Rushdie deploys with self-conscious artfulness — functions as a strategy for defamiliarizing the social hierarchies that structure Indian life, making visible what ideological normalization tends to render invisible.

Class is a persistent concern throughout Midnight's Children, manifested not only through the socioeconomic differentials that divide characters but through the cultural and linguistic markers that distinguish the English-educated elite from those who inhabit other social worlds. Rushdie's novel is

written in a language that is itself hierarchically marked: the ornate, allusive, multilingual English of the text enacts the class position of its narrator and of the cosmopolitan, anglophone readership at whom it is implicitly directed (Brennan, 1989). This linguistic hierarchy — the way in which access to certain registers of English functions as cultural capital — is itself a dimension of the novel's engagement with social stratification.

The Emergency of 1975-1977 functions in the novel as a moment of crisis that exposes the authoritarian potential latent within the hierarchical structures of the postcolonial state. Indira Gandhi's suspension of democratic institutions, refracted through Rushdie's satirical lens, becomes a figure for the broader tendency of postcolonial nationalism to reproduce the exclusions and hierarchies of the colonial order it ostensibly displaces. The Midnight's Children's Conference, with its internal disputes and eventual dissolution, enacts in miniature the failure of the nationalist promise of equality and community.

4. The God of Small Things (1997): Caste, Transgression, and the Violence of Normalcy

If Rushdie's novel situates social hierarchy within the grand narrative of national history, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things locates it in the intimate, domestic spaces of everyday life. Roy's novel, set in a Syrian Christian family in Kerala, centres upon the illicit love between Ammu, a divorced woman of the upper caste, and Velutha, an Untouchable carpenter and activist — a relationship whose transgression of what Roy calls the Love Laws produces catastrophic consequences (Roy, 1997). The novel's title refers precisely to the small, overlooked things — gestures, looks, touch, proximity — that carry the weight of social meaning in a caste-ordered world. Roy's representation of the caste system draws heavily upon the concrete realities of the Kerala context, where the hierarchies of Hinduism intersected historically with the class structures of colonial modernity and the political dynamics of Communist activism. Velutha's membership in the Communist Party of India represents a utopian attempt to transcend caste through class solidarity, yet the novel is ruthless in exposing the limits of this aspiration: when the Love Laws are transgressed, it is the party — ostensibly committed to equality — that participates in the violent restoration of caste order (Roy, 1997). This indictment of the Left's failure to confront caste hierarchy is one of the novel's most politically pointed interventions.

The structural innovation of Roy's narrative — its deliberate disruption of chronological sequence, its fragmentation, its recursive returns to a single moment of catastrophe — enacts formally the experience of caste time, a time in which the past is never truly past but continuously

erupts into the present. The Big Things — the grand historical narratives of nationalism, colonialism, and revolution — are shown to be sustained by and dependent upon the enforcement of the Small Things, the everyday regulations of caste propriety that govern who can touch whom, who can love whom, and who can be punished for transgressing these boundaries.

Feminist theorists have noted the gendered dimensions of caste oppression in Roy's novel: Ammu, as a woman who has violated the social codes of respectable femininity through her divorce, occupies a doubly marginal position within the social hierarchy (Mukherjee, 2004). The Love Laws, as Roy presents them, are simultaneously caste laws and gender laws, governing the bodies of women and Untouchables with equal ferocity. The violence visited upon Velutha — beaten to death by policemen who understand themselves to be protecting the social order — is mirrored by the slow violence visited upon Ammu, who is expelled from the family home and dies, prematurely aged, in anonymous poverty.

5. The Inheritance of Loss (2006): Class, Migration, and the Global Topographies of Inequality

Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss, awarded the Booker Prize in 2006, extends the analysis of social hierarchy beyond the domestic spaces of Indian society to engage with the global structures of inequality that govern the postcolonial world. Set simultaneously in the remote Himalayan town of Kalimpong and in the immigrant underworld of New York City, the novel traces the interconnections between local hierarchies of caste and class and the global hierarchy of nations that produces and sustains the phenomenon of undocumented migration (Desai, 2006).

The novel's central figure, the retired judge Jemubhai Patel, embodies the peculiar tragedy of the colonial mimic: educated at Cambridge, shaped by the English educational system to despise the Indian self he was, he returns to India to find himself belonging fully to neither world. His internalized racism — expressed in his contemptuous treatment of his wife, his servants, and ultimately himself — represents a powerful illustration of the Fanonian dynamic of colonial self-hatred. The judge's story is a study in the psychological costs of upward mobility within a hierarchical system predicated upon racial and cultural subordination (Desai, 2006).

The parallel narrative of the judge's grandson, Biju, who works illegally in a series of low-end New York restaurants, confronts a different face of global inequality. Biju's experiences in America expose the invisible labour that sustains the lifestyle of the privileged West: the undocumented workers who cook, clean, and serve are the human infrastructure upon which the global economy depends, yet they exist in a zone of legal non-existence, without rights, protections,

or recognition. Desai's juxtaposition of these two narratives — the postcolonial judge who has internalized the values of the colonizer, and the economic migrant who is denied even the precarious dignity that the judge achieved — creates a powerful structural argument about the multiple scales at which social hierarchy operates.

Class in Desai's novel is inseparable from the legacies of colonialism and the dynamics of contemporary globalization. The Gorkha separatist movement that forms the novel's political backdrop is itself a manifestation of the hierarchies of ethnicity and regional identity that structure Indian political life, adding another layer to the novel's analysis of the intersecting axes of social stratification. The novel ultimately suggests that the inheritance of loss — the title phrase — refers not to any single loss but to the accumulated impoverishment, psychological as well as material, that is the structural bequest of colonial history and its postcolonial continuation (Desai, 2006).

6. The White Tiger (2008): Caste, Capital, and the Predatory Modernity of New India

Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger, which won the Booker Prize in 2008, is perhaps the most explicitly political of the four novels under examination. Written in the form of letters addressed by the protagonist Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who is preparing to visit India to study its economic miracle, the novel is a sustained and savage critique of the myth of India Shining — the ideological narrative that presented India's rapid economic growth in the 2000s as evidence of a fundamental democratization of opportunity (Adiga, 2008).

Balram Halwai is the novel's central paradox: a man from the lower castes of rural Bihar who achieves success by internalizing and operationalizing the predatory logic of the ruling class. His ascent from servant to entrepreneur — accomplished through murder — is presented not as an exception to the system but as a distillation of its essential logic. The 'White Tiger' of the title refers to Balram's exceptional quality, his capacity to break free from what he calls the Rooster Coop — the system of social and psychological containment that keeps the servants of India in a state of permanent subjugation, too afraid and too morally compromised to challenge their masters (Adiga, 2008).

Adiga's engagement with caste is distinctive in that it situates caste within the contemporary political economy of neoliberal capitalism. The novel argues that caste and class have merged in the new India into a single system of predatory extraction, with the upper castes and the new capitalist class functioning in alliance to maintain a permanent underclass of servants, drivers, and unskilled labourers whose exploitation underwrites the prosperity of the few. The Darkness — Adiga's name

for rural, impoverished India — and the Light — the urban, consumerist India of shopping malls and call centres — are presented not as stages in a developmental sequence but as mutually constitutive poles of a single system of inequality.

The epistolary form of the novel is itself a satirical device that highlights the hierarchies of knowledge and discourse. Balram's letters to the Chinese Premier — written in a vigorous, idiomatic English that is simultaneously an index of his education and of his social ambiguity — perform a kind of ventriloquism, appropriating the modes of address of the educated elite in order to speak truth to power. Adiga's novel, like Rushdie's, is thus self-consciously aware of the hierarchical dimensions of the language in which it is written, and uses that awareness as part of its critical argument. (Thieme, 2010)

7. Comparative Analysis: Convergences and Divergences

7.1 The Representation of Caste across the Four Novels

Across all four novels, caste emerges as a fundamental organizing principle of Indian social life, though each author approaches it from a different angle and with a different emphasis. Roy's treatment is the most direct and historically grounded, focusing on the material and bodily consequences of caste transgression in a specific regional context. Adiga's treatment is the most systemic, situating caste within the broader political economy of contemporary capitalism. Rushdie's engagement with caste is more oblique, filtered through the lens of communal identity and national politics, while Desai's is more psychological, concerned with the internalization of hierarchical values across generations.

7.2 Language as Social Capital

All four novels are acutely aware of the role of language — particularly English — as a marker and mechanism of social stratification. Rushdie's flamboyant postmodernist prose enacts the cosmopolitan cultural capital of the anglophone elite. Roy's language is marked by a self-conscious hybridity that translates Malayalam idioms and social practices into English in order to preserve their specificity and resist the universalizing tendencies of metropolitan English. Desai captures the social anxiety of those who aspire to linguistic belonging without fully achieving it. Adiga deploys a vernacular directness that is itself a rhetorical strategy, claiming the authority of lived experience against the mystifications of official discourse.

7.3 Gender and the Architecture of Inequality

Gender is an axis of social hierarchy that operates across all four novels, though it receives the most sustained attention in Roy's text. In all four, women occupy structurally subordinate positions within the social hierarchies represented, and in all four, the transgression of gender norms is associated with punishment, exclusion, and social death. The intersection of caste and gender — the particular vulnerability of lower-caste women, the different forms of surveillance to which upper-caste women are subject — is a theme that unifies all four novels and points toward the need for an intersectional analytical framework adequate to the complexity of Indian social life.

7.4 The Role of the State

The postcolonial Indian state appears in all four novels as a force that reproduces rather than transforms social hierarchies. In Rushdie, the state is associated with the authoritarian manipulation of democratic institutions. In Roy, it is the instrument through which caste violence is legitimized. In Desai, it is implicated in the global structures of inequality that produce undocumented migration. In Adiga, it functions as a partner in the predatory capitalism that maintains the Rooster Coop. This consistent critique of the state as an agent of inequality rather than its remedy represents one of the most significant political arguments of the corpus as a whole.

8. The Architecture of Inequality: Structural Patterns and Literary Strategies

The concept of architecture is instructive here, for it suggests that inequality is not accidental or contingent but is built — constructed through deliberate design, maintained through ongoing effort, and reproduced through the socialization of each new generation into the structures it has inherited. Each of the four novels under examination maps a particular dimension of this architecture, and each deploys a distinctive set of literary strategies to make that architecture visible and subject to critique.

Narrative structure itself functions as an ideological form in these novels. Rushdie's spiral narrative, which circles endlessly back upon itself, enacts the way in which the hierarchies of Indian history perpetually return to haunt the present. Roy's fragmented, non-linear narrative recreates formally the psychic experience of trauma — the way in which caste violence cannot be processed linearly but erupts repeatedly, insistently, into consciousness. Desai's double narrative, moving between the mountains of northeastern India and the basements of New York, creates a spatial figure for the global architecture of inequality. Adiga's epistolary form, addressed to a foreign Head of State, performs the gesture of speaking to power from outside the official channels of representation.

Point of view and focalization are equally important. The choice of narrators — a telepathic bourgeois Muslim in Rushdie, a female omniscient narrator who speaks for the silenced Untouchable

in Roy, a multiply displaced third-person narrator in Desai, a murderous lower-caste entrepreneur in Adiga — reflects and enacts the complex politics of voice and representation that are at stake in any literary engagement with social hierarchy. Who gets to speak, who speaks for whom, and in what language: these are political questions that each of these novels poses with particular urgency.

9. Conclusion

The four Booker Prize-winning novels examined in this paper — Midnight's Children, The God of Small Things, The Inheritance of Loss, and The White Tiger — collectively constitute a sustained literary engagement with the architecture of inequality in India. Spanning nearly three decades of postcolonial literary production, they trace the fault lines of caste and class across a variety of historical moments, geographic locations, and social contexts, producing in their totality a complex and multilayered portrait of a society in which the promise of equality encoded in the Constitution has consistently been deferred by the power of inherited hierarchies.

The theoretical frameworks employed in this analysis — Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Bourdieu's sociology of cultural capital, Ambedkar's critique of caste, and Fanon's analysis of colonized subjectivity — have enabled a reading of these novels that attends simultaneously to their literary strategies and their socio-political arguments. What emerges from this reading is not a single, unified picture but a set of overlapping and sometimes contradictory diagnoses of the mechanisms through which social hierarchy is constructed, maintained, and reproduced in Indian society.

What is perhaps most significant about these novels as a body of work is the complexity and sophistication of their engagement with the question of resistance and transformation. None of them offers simple solutions or optimistic narratives of overcoming. Rushdie's Saleem ends the novel broken and fragmented. Roy's Ammu and Velutha are destroyed by the forces they dare to challenge. Desai's characters are caught in loops of loss from which there is no obvious exit. Adiga's Balram, in achieving his freedom, has reproduced the moral economy of the system he escaped. The architecture of inequality, these novels collectively suggest, is not easily dismantled — but the act of making it visible, of insisting upon its constructed and contingent nature, is itself a form of resistance with which literary art is uniquely equipped.

In conclusion, the Booker Prize-winning Indian novels in English examined here demonstrate that literature occupies a vital and irreplaceable role in the ongoing project of understanding and contesting the social hierarchies that continue to structure human life in the subcontinent and beyond. They bear witness to the persistence of inequality, give voice to those whom inequality

silences, and challenge their readers — wherever they may be located within the social architecture — to reckon with the structures that organize their own lives.

References

[1] Adiga.A (2008), The White Tiger, Atlantic Books.

[2] Ambedkar.B.R(1936), Annihilation of Caste, Bhim Patrika Publications.

[3] Bourdieu.P(1984), Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (R. Nice, Trans.), Harvard University Press.

[4] Brennan.T(1989), Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation. Macmillan.

[5] Chatterjee.P(1993), The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, Princeton University Press.

[6] Desai.K (2006), The Inheritance of Loss, Atlantic Books.

[7] Fanon.F(1963), The Wretched of the Earth (C. Farrington, Trans.), Grove Press.

[8] Gramsci.A (1971), Selections from the Prison Notebooks (Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith, Eds. & Trans.), International Publishers.

[9] Mukherjee.M (2004), The Twice Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English, Arnold-Heinemann.

[10] Roy.A (1997), The God of Small Things, IndiaInk.

[11] Rushdie.S (1981), Midnight's Children, Jonathan Cape.

[12] Said.E.W(1993), Culture and Imperialism, Knopf.

[13] Spivak.G.C (1988), Can the Subaltern Speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture (pp. 271–313), University of Illinois Press.

[14] Thieme.J(2010), Postcolonial Literary Geographies: Out of Place, Palgrave Macmillan.

[15] Trivedi.H (2008), Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation, In P. St-Pierre & P. C. Kar (Eds.), In Translation – Reflections, Refractions, Transformations (pp. 277–287), John Benjamins.

[16] Viswanathan.G (1989), Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India, Columbia University Press.