

Cultural Contrast in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*

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Abstract:

Aravind Adiga and Monica Ali are towering figures in the field of literature. Both the writers have explored various dimensions of society and culture in their literary masterpieces. This research paper is an attempt to bring forward a contrast between two different cultures as depicted by Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* and Monica Ali in *Brick Lane*. The paper will begin with a brief introduction to culture, its significance in the field of literature and will also throw light on cultural contrast in Aravind Adiga's '*The White Tiger*' and Monica Ali's '*Brick Lane*.' Aravind Adiga in '*The White Tiger*' has shown the influence of globalization on Indian culture whereas Monica Ali in '*Brick Lane*' has focused on the life of Nazneen, a Bangladeshi young girl who was married off at an early age and how she struggles to establish an identity of her own in the midst of cultural shift due to immigration. The analysis would be done taking into consideration language, religion, materialism, ethnicity, cuisine, and depiction of female characters.

Keywords: Cultural Contrast; *The White Tiger*; *Brick Lane*; Language; Religion; Ethnicity

Introduction

Culture as defined by Edward Burnett Tylor in his treatise 'Primitive Culture' (1871) is that "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871). The concept of culture laid down by Tylor has a great significance. It establishes the idea that culture is a mirror to the ideals and beliefs of a community. These ideals are the basis of their identity and it promotes harmony, and mutual cooperation. The other main elements of culture comprise of language, ethnicities, religion, literature, and much more. Every element of culture has a significance of its own. Language for instance is regarded as one of the foundations of culture as it helps in the communication of ideas and beliefs and moreover it is a driving force of building great social networks. Although there exists a wide range of

languages depending upon the varied culture across the world yet one can find certain similar dimensions in it. For instance, the meaning of English word chair is similar to that of Spanish word silla.

An important element of culture is customs. As defined in American Dictionary of the English language, custom is “a traditional practice or usual way of doing something followed by a social group or people.” Customs hold a great significance in an individual’s life as it shapes a person’s experience and behaviour. Ruth Benedict in her ‘Patterns of Culture’ (1935) has highlighted this aspect of custom by mentioning that “From the moment of his birth the customs into which he is born shape his experience and behaviour” (Benedict, 1935, p. 02).

Religion is another important element of a culture. It is based on the various ways through which people show their devotion and faith towards the Almighty. There exists wide range of religion in this world, Hinduism, Christianity, Sikhism, Islam, Judaism, and much more to pen down. Each religion has its own practices and rituals which shows its vibrant trait. Michael Banton, a British sociologist has discussed the concept of religion in his treatise ‘Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion’. In this text, he defined religion as, “an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Banton, 1978, pp. 96).

Another important element of culture is rituals. Rituals are defined as ceremonies which are performed by an individual on certain occasions like marriage, childbirth, puberty, festivals, demise, etc. Rituals vary from community to community yet it shows how vibrant a culture is. They play a significant role in fostering social cohesion and solidarity. It helps people in connecting with their culture and thus promoting harmony. Rituals are also a way to express values and beliefs of a particular community. They also play a major role in enhancing a person’s mental growth and happiness.

Literature is also an important element of culture which serves as a window to the kind of society where a person lives. Culture and Literature share a delicate relationship as literature is a medium through which people communicate about their culture. There are several writers who have portrayed several aspects of culture in their literary works which has left an indelible impression on the mind of the readers. This research paper would throw light on the various cultural contrasts shown by two South-Asian writers in their literary masterpieces. The paper would analyse Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* to bring forward the differences in their depiction of culture.

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga is a tale about Balram Halwai, a criminal turned entrepreneur and how he struggles to establish his identity in this world. In this novel, Aravind Adiga has also portrayed the distinction between two kinds of India, one lighter India and the other darker India. One can also find several symbols which present a caricature of how an Indian society works. Adiga has also brought forward several nuances of Indian

culture which holds great significance. Aravind Adiga has depicted caste conflicts in a remarkable manner. He has mostly dealt with the darker aspects of India and has picturized the dominance of the West on Indian culture.

Brick Lane by Monica Ali is a story which revolves around the character of Nazneen who was married off at an earlier age and her struggle to establish an identity of her own. The novel shows the plight of Bangladeshi immigrants and their struggle to survive in a foreign land. "The main focus of Monica Ali is on the theme of cultural collision of the migrants of Bangladesh who go abroad to earn dollars" (Madhvan, et al., 2019, pp. 1288). Monica Ali in her novel has also brought into light the kind of upbringing which a girl receives and how it moulds her entire life.

Cultural Contrast in The White Tiger and Brick Lane

The White Tiger and *Brick Lane* are two such novels which portray several ideas out of which culture is the most significant one. Although culture is the common link between the two novels yet one can find several contrasts in it. For instance, *The White Tiger* shows the *dominance of western culture* in India. Adiga has brought forward this idea by emphasising completely on the dominance of English language. In the beginning chapters, he has expressed how English language has become a channel to maintain one's social status. "Neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English" (Adiga, 2009, p. 03). Monica Ali on the other hand has depicted how the protagonist Nazneen faced difficulty speaking in English language. "Nazneen could say two things in English: sorry and thank you. She could spend another day alone. It was only another day" (Ali, 2004, 19).

Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* has focused on two facets of India: rural vs urban where the former represents darker India and the latter represents lighter India. He writes: "... India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (Adiga, 2009, 14).

According to Adiga, the darker India although consists of fertile lands yet people live in poverty here whereas lighter India is developed and westernized. In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali has shown distinction between two kinds of communities living in London, one which follows the traditions of the west and the other which keeps the older tradition alive. This distinction has been brought forward with the aid of two characters from the novel, Chanu Ahmed and Mrs Azad. Chanu Ahmed is of the view that an immigrant in London is blindly following western culture and are putting their identity at stake:

... Kindly explain this tragedy. I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's own sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. I'm talking— (Ali, 2004, 113)

Mrs Azad on the other hand has no problem with following western ideals. She states that,

... Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes! (Ali, 2004, 113)

Contrast in culture can also be seen in terms of *religion*. Religion in *The White Tiger* has been mocked by Aravind Adiga as he has pointed out that gods in Hindu culture do little work and he even used the term 'arse' to refer to Hindu deities which is a slang for fleshy part of human body that one sits on. "I guess, Your Excellency, that I too should start off by kissing some god's arse. Which god's arse, though? There are so many choices. See, the Muslims have one god. The Christians have three gods. And we Hindus have 36,000,000 gods. Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divine arses for me to choose from" (Adiga, 2009, 08).

Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* has shown the significance of religion by focusing on how praying to the Almighty can provide with calmness to an individual. "Then she selected a page at random and began to read. To God belongs all that the heavens and the earth contain. We exhort you, as We have exhorted those to whom the Book was given before you, to fear God. If you deny Him, know that to God belongs all that the heavens and earth contain. God is self-sufficient and worthy of praise" (Ali, 2004, 19-20).

Adiga in *The White Tiger* has dealt with the *theme of success* in an unusual way. Success in the story does not depend upon loyalty or morality but rather on treachery and crime. Dr Jyoti Sharma in her research paper titled, 'Cultural Encounters in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*' has pointed out this idea by mentioning that, "Balram's success too is based on murder of his master and stealing his money. Success and morality no longer have any connection in this fast-paced rat race of the modern world. Traditions and conventions are sacrificed at the altar of materialistic gains. Loyalty in relationships is a thing of the past. Relationships are used as a ladder to advance in life. Balram, *The White Tiger*, has transcended the boundaries of class, culture and ethics to roar loudly and proclaim his success" (Sharma, 2019, 73-74).

Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* has presented success on a positive note. In this novel, the protagonist Nazneen was able to find success by breaking away from the boundaries laid around her and establishing her identity as an independent woman. Dr Latha S. in her book titled 'Three Diaspora Women Writers: Monica Ali, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Taslima Nasreen' has brought forward this idea by mentioning that, "The freedom that the women Nazneen, Razia and Mrs. Azad and their children enjoy in the adapted land, empower them to overcome the cultural and societal restrictions that materialize as independent beings" (S., Latha, 2021, 40).

Contrast in culture can also be seen in the *portrayal of female characters* in the two novels. *The White Tiger* is a narrative which not only portrays Balram's perspective but also

throws light on various female characters like Kusum and Pinky Madam. Kusum, Balram's grandmother unlike other Indian female is portrayed as a tough individual who is in charge of the entire household. She is depicted as a cunning lady who rules through fear. "... Her teeth were all gone, but this made her grin more cunning. She had grinned her way into control of the house; every son and daughter-in-law lived in fear of her" (Adiga, 2009, 15-16). Kusum is also projected as a money-minded person who demanded dowry in marriage. "After the wedding, Kusum Granny took the five thousand rupees and the Hero cycle and the thick gold necklace..." (Adiga, 2009, 51)

Another character Pinky Madam is portrayed as a beautiful American lady who constantly criticizes India and always yells at Balram. She is even compared to a goddess when Balram says, "Now another face appears, to the side of his, in memory's mirror. Pinky Madam – his wife. Every bit as good-looking as her husband; just as the image of the goddess in the Birla Hindu Temple in New Delhi is as fair as the god to whom she is married" (Adiga, 2009, 46). Pinky Madam is a lady who is demanding, critical and cruel towards Balram. One night, in a drunken state, she accidentally kills a child and upon discovering that her family is trying to put the blame on Balram, she becomes appalled and breaks her ties with Ashok and flees to America.

Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* has projected female characters as subjugated and victimized individuals. The characters Nazneen and Hasina serve as a brilliant example to indicate the plight of women who are looked down by the patriarchal setup. Nazneen, the protagonist of the novel was married off at a younger age to Chanu Ahmed who was double her age. Chanu never allowed Nazneen to roam out of the house and confined her to do household chores only. "Why should you go out? said Chanu. If you go out, ten people will say, I saw her walking on the street. And I will look like a fool. Personally, I don't mind if you go out but these people are so ignorant. What can you do?" (Ali, 2004, 45) Another incident throws light on subjugation of women. Nazneen wanted to take English lessons so that she could adapt herself in a new environment. But Chanu didn't permit her to do so. "You're going to be a mother... will that not keep you busy enough? And you can't take a baby to college. Babies have to be fed; they have to have their bottoms cleaned. It's not so simple as that. Just to go to college, like that" (Ali, 2004, 77).

Hasina, Nazneen's sister has been projected in a different manner by Monica Ali. Hasina right from the beginning has been of a rebellious nature who took control of her own life and upon reaching the age of sixteen eloped with her lover Malek. But Hasina's marriage with Malek didn't work well as he was abusive. Hasina for quite some time dealt with it patiently but when things got worse, she left Malek and fled to Narayanganj. Hasina was in constant touch with Nazneen through a series of letters where she narrated everything about her life. In her letters, Hasina narrated about her observations regarding the disparities between men and women. "Everything good between us now. I do not let my tongue make trouble for it as my husband say. Just because man is kind to wife it do not mean she can say what she like. If women understanding this no one will beat" (Ali, 2004, 25).

Another instance where contrast in culture can be seen is the aspect of *materialism*. Materialism constitutes the physical objects and spaces which people use to define their culture. These include homes, schools, religious places, workplace, tools, means of production, goods and products, stores, and so forth. All these physical aspects of culture help in defining its members' behaviours and perceptions. The novels *The White Tiger* and *Brick Lane* exhibit several aspects of materialism in a remarkable manner. In *The White Tiger* Aravind Adiga has made a reference to materialism through the character of Vijay, a bus conductor. The protagonist Balram Halwai was so much fascinated by him that he dreamt of being like him. "I wanted to be like Vijay – with a uniform, a pay cheque, a shiny whistle with a piercing sound, and people looking at me with eyes that said, *How important he looks*" (Adiga, 2009, 31).

Brick Lane by Monica Ali also throws light on several aspects of materialism. One such aspect is that of how youngsters are getting spoilt because of alcohol consumption. This aspect has been well-highlighted by Monica Ali through the character of Chanu Ahmed. Chanu once invited his friend Dr Azad over dinner where they discussed about younger generation getting addicted to alcohol consumption. "Our community is not educated about this, and much else besides. But for my part, I don't plan to risk these things happening to my children. We will go back before they get spoiled" (Ali, 2004, 32).

Ethnicity is also another aspect which can be taken into consideration to depict contrast in cultures. It is that aspect of culture which focuses on the identity of an individual. Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* has provided with a glimpse of Tamils living in southern part of India. He has mocked them through the character of Vijay by saying that, "The south is full of Tamils. You know who the Tamils are? Negroes. We're the sons of the Aryans who came to India. We made them our slaves. And now they give us lectures. *Negroes*" (Adiga, 2009, 272).

Monica Ali in *Brick Lane* has provided with a glimpse of Sylhetis, an ethno-cultural group that are mostly associated with the Sylhet region in South-Asia. This has been portrayed through the character of Chanu Ahmed. Chanu in the initial chapter of the novel presented a description about Sylhetis focusing mostly on their qualities. "... most of our people here are Sylhetis. They all stick together because they come from the same district. They know each other from the villages, and they come to Tower Hamlets and they think they are back in the village..." (Ali, 2004, 28). Another instance where ethnicity is discussed is when Chanu Ahmed was defending the Muslims. He had conflict with his daughter to which he said, "... Who was it who saved the work of Plato and Aristotle for the West during the Dark Ages? Us. It was us. Muslims..." (Ali, 2004, 215)

Cuisine is another aspect which can be taken into consideration to depict contrast in culture. Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* has portrayed aspects of Indian cuisine. This can be exemplified through the character of Balram Halwai as he in his childhood had worked in

a tea shop and he even knew how to cook mouth-watering delicacies. "... Certainly, sir. I cook very well. Very tasty sweets. Gulab jamuns, laddoos, anything you desire, I said." (Adiga, 65). Another instance is when Balram drove Ashok and Pinky Madam to Delhi. There he was asked to cook for the couple. "I went up to the apartment with them; the Mongoose wanted me to make a meal for them, and I made a *daal* and *chapattis*, and a dish of okra." (Adiga, 2009, 189).

In *Brick Lane*, Monica Ali has projected cuisine in a different manner. In the novel, there was an instance where Nazneen was preparing evening meal when she came to London after marriage. "She should be getting on with the evening meal. The lamb curry was prepared. She had made it last night with tomatoes and new potatoes." (Ali, 2004,19). Nazneen would also make sure that proper arrangements be done which shows how much she values the aesthetic role of food. "She would rinse the glasses and rub them with newspaper to make them shine. The tablecloth had some spots to be scrubbed out." (Ibid). Monica Ali even projected Nazneen as someone who was taking care of the peculiarities while preparing meal. "She put three pinches of salt in with the lentils, now that they were soft enough to break down. She stirred in chilli, cumin, turmeric and chopped ginger." (Ali, 2004, 63)

Both Aravind Adiga and Monica Ali have brought forward several dimensions of culture in a remarkable manner. Their works, *The White Tiger* and *Brick Lane* clearly demonstrate the significance of culture in an individual's life. These works exhibit a sharp contrast in cultural aspects ranging from language to depiction of how women are treated in the respective cultures. In conclusion, one can say that culture plays a significant role in a person's life. Culture serves as a mirror to a community's ideals and beliefs. Although there are many aspects of culture which makes it unique and remarkable, yet language and literature are such elements which help in promoting and dispersing culture to a larger extent.

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