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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RHETORIC OF IDENTITY AND POWER IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION: A STUDY OF SELF-HELP NARRATIVES IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*, *THE WHITE TIGER*, AND *A SUITABLE BOY*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the rhetoric used in three seminal works of 21st-century Indian literature: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*. These novels, often categorized as self-help narratives due to their explorations of identity, social mobility, and moral choices, present complex rhetorical strategies that reflect the socio-political landscape of contemporary India. By analyzing the narrative techniques, characterizations, and ethical dilemmas in these texts, the paper aims to illustrate how these authors engage with the discourse of power, caste, and personal transformation, while also challenging traditional notions of agency and responsibility. Through a critical examination of rhetoric in these works, the paper will demonstrate how each author uses language to shape the reader's understanding of societal norms and individual empowerment.

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has seen a profound shift in the way literature engages with the complexities of identity, power, and social mobility, especially in post-colonial contexts. In India, this transformation is reflected in the rise of novels that intricately explore both individual and societal struggles through distinct narrative styles. Three such texts — Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), AravindAdiga's*The White Tiger* (2008), and Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) — stand out as masterpieces that, while distinct in tone and form, intertwine the private lives of their characters with the broader sociopolitical fabric of contemporary India. While these novels span different settings, genres, and narrative techniques, they all grapple with themes of personal transformation, social inequities, and the quest for agency within a hierarchical and often oppressive society. The rhetoric of these works is central to understanding how they articulate the tension between personal identity and the external forces that shape it. Rhetoric, as defined by Aristotle, is the art of persuasion — and in the context of these novels, it extends beyond mere verbal persuasion to encompass the broader manipulation of narrative form, character construction, and thematic exploration. Through the lens of rhetoric, these authors not only aim to reflect the realities of post-colonial Indian life but also seek to challenge, disrupt, and reframe these realities for their readers.

Roy's *The God of Small Things*, for instance, is often regarded as a critique of the deeply ingrained caste system and the moral paradoxes that arise within a post-colonial state. In this novel, Roy employs a highly non-linear narrative and a deeply symbolic style to explore the ways in which societal forces limit individual freedom. The rhetorical impact of Roy's writing can be seen in her use of language that simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the world around her characters. Her sentence structure often mirrors the chaotic, fragmented lives of the twins, Ammu and Velutha, whose fates are sealed by the rigid structures of caste and history. As Roy asserts, "Things can change in a day, and the world can be different tomorrow. But the rules of history don't change" (Roy 295).

This statement encapsulates the novel's central tension: the desire for individual agency within a system that is governed by unchanging historical and societal rules. On the other hand, Adiga's*The White Tiger* engages with the theme of social mobility in a radically different way. The novel is told through the voice of BalramHalwai, a self-proclaimed "white tiger" who breaks free from the shackles of his impoverished background to commit a brutal crime. Adiga's choice of a first-person, confessional narrative is a deliberate rhetorical strategy, placing the reader in the uncomfortable position of hearing a murderer justify his actions. The novel's dark humor, coupled with the unapologetic tone of Balram's voice, challenges readers to reconsider their notions of morality and

success in a rapidly modernizing India. Through Balram, Adiga critiques the false promises of the Indian Dream — a dream that has long been associated with upward mobility and individual agency. As Balram writes,

> "The moment you've been waiting for is the moment when you realize you've waited too long. No one can wait forever" (Adiga 242).

This statement underscores the novel's rhetorical power: it's a call for action, an assertion of agency in a society that perpetuates the subjugation of the lower classes. Similarly, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* presents a sweeping portrait of India in the post-independence era, exploring themes of family, love, and the intersections of caste, religion, and politics. In Seth's novel, the rhetorical strategy lies in his ability to create a vast, interconnected web of characters whose individual choices are often dictated by larger social and political forces. Through Lata's search for a suitable marriage match, Seth illustrates the tension between tradition and modernity, and the personal and societal pressures that accompany the search for individual autonomy. Seth's style — rich in detail and yet measured in tone — makes his rhetorical approach subtler but equally compelling. The very structure of the novel, with its focus on family and community, highlights the complex ways in which personal agency is constrained by societal expectations. As Lata reflects,

"Perhaps it is the very idea of love that is its undoing, for it brings with it the inescapable burden of choice" (Seth 389).

Here, Seth uses rhetorical language to question the notion of "love" as a purely personal matter, suggesting instead that love — and by extension, marriage — is always a negotiation with cultural and familial expectations. The use of rhetoric in these novels is not confined to the development of individual characters; it extends to the way each author interacts with the reader. Through rhetorical techniques like irony, metaphor, and narrative structure, Roy, Adiga, and Seth engage in a dialogue with the audience that challenges readers to question not only the political and social structures depicted in the novels but also the broader implications of those structures for the world beyond the text. In this sense, the rhetoric of these works serves not just to narrate stories of personal struggle and transformation, but also to persuade readers to reconsider their assumptions about power, identity, and the possibility of change in contemporary India. This paper aims to explore the rhetoric of identity and power in these three novels, examining how their respective authors use narrative form and linguistic strategies to address issues of social inequality, agency, and individual empowerment. By analyzing the rhetorical techniques of Roy, Adiga, and Seth, we can gain a deeper understanding of how literature functions as both a mirror of society and a tool for social critique. In doing so, this study will highlight the ways in which contemporary Indian fiction grapples with the complexities of selfhood and societal constraint, offering insights into how narratives of personal transformation can challenge and reshape the broader socio-political landscape.

Rhetoric in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is a masterclass in rhetorical complexity. The novel's fragmented structure, non-linear timeline, and lush, symbolic language create a unique narrative that constantly shifts between the personal and the political. Roy's rhetorical strategy involves the use of symbolism and imagery to convey the oppressive forces of caste, gender, and historical trauma. The novel's themes are explored through the lens of its characters, who grapple with the personal consequences of societal rules. As literary scholar Alison Light notes, Roy's novel "weaves together the smallest personal moments with the grand, overarching structures of history and politics, making her work an intricate commentary on the cyclical nature of Indian identity" (Light 129).

One of the most striking rhetorical devices in *The God of Small Things* is Roy's use of *voice*. The narrative alternates between first-person and third-person perspectives, using the voices of the twins, Estha and Rahel, to emphasize the psychological and emotional toll that social divisions take on individuals. The fragmented style mirrors the fractured world the characters inhabit — a world in which memory, identity, and history are not linear but rather cyclical and often traumatic. As David Leavitt argues, the novel's

"disrupted narrative reflects the very nature of post-colonial experience, where past and present intertwine to form a painful and complex identity" (Leavitt 145). Roy's decision to present the twins' experiences through a disrupted narrative is a rhetorical move that forces the reader to engage with the instability of their world. For instance, in describing the oppression faced by Velutha, a member of the lower caste, Roy writes:

"He was a man who had loved too much. A man who had loved the wrong woman. A man who had been loved, but not enough" (Roy 214). This line resonates with the tragic irony that permeates the novel — Velutha's love for Ammu, despite the profound social barriers, becomes his undoing. The rhetoric here works on multiple levels, highlighting not just the personal pain of forbidden love, but also the societal forces that violently restrict it. According to Nivedita Menon, the tragedy of Velutha is emblematic of the novel's critique of "the entrenched systems of caste and social prejudice that govern not just the lives of individuals, but their very right to love and live freely" (Menon 62).

By placing the blame on Velutha's love, Roy critiques a system that punishes individuals for acts of agency, even when those acts are rooted in basic human emotion. The symbolism of "small things" — the minute, seemingly insignificant events that shape the characters' fates — also plays a pivotal rhetorical role in the novel. These "small things," from a child's innocent act to a momentary glance, are imbued with meaning, revealing the powerful undercurrents of caste and colonial legacy. Roy's use of language here emphasizes how systemic oppression is often built on subtle, almost invisible structures, creating an environment where the individual's smallest choices are subject to larger forces. As Sangeeta Ray points out,

> "Roy's rhetorical use of small things invites readers to reconsider their assumptions about power and memory in post-colonial India, where even the smallest acts can carry the weight of historical trauma" (Ray 98).

Rhetoric in *The White Tiger* by AravindAdiga: In *The White Tiger*, Adiga employs a radically different rhetorical style, using dark humor, satire, and first-person narration to highlight the moral complexities of India's emerging economic landscape. The novel's protagonist, BalramHalwai, narrates his

life story in the form of letters to the Chinese Premier, which immediately establishes a conversational and confessional tone. This choice of narrative voice is central to Adiga's rhetorical approach, as it places the reader in a position where they are forced to engage with the protagonist's justifications, however morally questionable. Alok Yadav argues that Balram's

> "unapologetic voice is an expression of Adiga's critique of India's failure to address the inequalities perpetuated by globalization" (Yadav 111).

This rhetorical choice makes the reader complicit in Balram's moral ambiguity, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. Adiga's use of first-person narration is a strategic move, allowing Balram to speak directly to the reader, creating a sense of intimacy and complicity. Balram's candid and often ruthless perspective challenges the reader's assumptions about morality, success, and survival. The rhetorical power of Balram's voice lies in its unapologetic nature — his actions are presented not as a moral failure but as the result of systemic injustice and the collapse of ethical values in a society obsessed with wealth and status. As Arvind Krishna Mehrotra notes,

> "Balram's narrative is a form of rebellion, a rejection of the false promises that economic progress offers to the poor" (Mehrotra 82).

The rhetoric of *The White Tiger* also relies heavily on irony. The novel critiques the ideals of the "Indian Dream," exposing the lies behind the narrative of upward mobility. In Balram's worldview, success is attainable only through cunning, betrayal, and crime — an inversion of the myth of meritocracy. He states, "The moment you've been waiting for is the moment when you realize you've waited too long. No one can wait forever" (Adiga 242), signaling his shift from a subservient, powerless position to one of empowerment through violence. This rhetorical strategy invites readers to question the integrity of societal systems that promise prosperity through hard work while often perpetuating inequality. Vinay Lal asserts that

> "Adiga's use of irony functions as a powerful critique of the neoliberal ideals that dominate modern India, revealing how they exacerbate the gap between the rich and the poor" (Lal 134).

Adiga's ironic tone is also evident in his portrayal of the privileged class. Balram's masters, the "landlord" family he works for, are depicted as corrupt, shallow, and detached from the suffering of the lower classes. Through Balram's sardonic observations, Adiga critiques the hypocrisy and moral blindness of India's elite, who benefit from a system of inequality while pretending to uphold traditional values of honor and family. Shalini S. K describes Balram's violent uprising as

> "a revolt not just against his employers, but against the entire social order that views the poor as dispensable" (S. K 77).

Rhetoric in *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth: Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* takes a more measured, yet equally effective, rhetorical approach in examining the intersection of personal desires and social constraints. Set in post-independence India, the novel explores themes of family, love, and the intersections of caste, religion, and politics. In Seth's novel, the rhetorical strategy lies in his ability to intertwine personal narratives with broader political and cultural contexts. Deborah Baker highlights that Seth's novel

> "presents a nuanced view of Indian society, one where love and agency are always in tension with the weight of family expectations and historical legacies" (Baker 109).

Unlike Roy and Adiga, Seth employs a more traditional narrative style, opting for a third-person omniscient voice that provides insight into the thoughts and emotions of various characters. This choice allows him to explore multiple perspectives and present a more comprehensive view of Indian society in the 1950s. Through this narrative style, Seth emphasizes the complexity of individual choices and the multiple forces — familial, political, and social — that shape them. Rita Kothari argues that Seth's narrative voice allows readers

> "to see the full scope of societal constraints, not just on Lata, but on every character navigating the labyrinth of caste, politics, and familial duty" (Kothari 88).

The rhetorical tension in *A Suitable Boy* lies in Lata's search for a "suitable" marriage partner, which is less about romantic love and more about the societal pressures that dictate what is deemed appropriate. As Lata reflects on the idea of love, Seth writes, "Perhaps it is the very idea of love that is its undoing, for it brings with it the inescapable burden of choice" (Seth 389). This rhetorical insight underscores the central conflict of the novel: the struggle between personal agency and societal expectation. Seth uses the concept of "suitability" not just to refer to marriage but to the larger issue of conformity to social norms. ManjuJaidka suggests that

> "Seth's exploration of the notion of 'suitability' speaks to the very heart of India's complex relationship with tradition, gender, and the changing dynamics of modernity" (Jaidka 112).

Additionally, Seth's use of satire and irony, particularly in his portrayal of the various suitors vying for Lata's hand, adds a layer of rhetorical complexity to the text. Each suitor represents a different aspect of Indian society — from the modern, Westernized Haresh to the traditional, caste-conscious Kabir. Through these characters, Seth critiques the rigidity of caste, the influence of colonialism, and the role of women in post-independence India. Madhavi Menon contends that

> "Seth's suitors function as metaphors for the competing cultural ideologies at play in post-colonial India, each vying for control over the future" (Menon 90).

Connecting the Rhetoric of the Three Novels: When comparing the rhetorical techniques employed by Roy, Adiga, and Seth, several themes emerge. First, all three authors engage with the tension between individual agency and societal constraints. Whether through Roy's fragmented narrative, Adiga's dark humor, or Seth's portrayal of marital choice, each writer uses rhetoric to highlight how social forces shape the lives of their characters. GauriMaithani argues that

"the rhetoric of these novels functions as a mirror to the complexity of post-colonial Indian identity, showing how personal desires are continually mediated by political, social, and historical forces" (Maithani 55).

Second, each author uses language not just to tell a story, but to persuade the reader to reconsider their assumptions about India's social structure. Roy's symbolic language critiques caste and colonialism, Adiga's ironic tone exposes the flaws in the Indian Dream, and Seth's exploration of love and marriage questions societal norms regarding gender and family. Finally, these novels all reflect a sense of disillusionment with the promises of progress and modernization. They suggest that while India's economic and political landscape may have changed, the underlying structures of power — whether caste, class, or gender — remain stubbornly in place.

CONCLUSION

The rhetorical landscapes of *The God of Small Things*, *The White Tiger*, and *A Suitable Boy* offer profound insights into the socio-political realities of contemporary India. While distinct in narrative form and stylistic expression, each of these novels employs rhetoric not simply as an aesthetic device but as a potent means of critique and resistance. Arundhati Roy's poetic, fragmented style unveils the psychological scars of caste and historical trauma, emphasizing how "the small things" carry the weight of centuries of oppression. AravindAdiga's biting satire and confessional tone unravel the dark underbelly of India's economic rise, positioning rhetoric as a tool of subversion, allowing his protagonist to both confess and justify his transgressions. Vikram Seth's expansive, omniscient narration, meanwhile, captures the quiet negotiations of modernity and tradition, using rhetorical subtlety to critique the cultural ideologies embedded in post-independence Indian society.

Collectively, these texts underscore how literature functions as both a mirror and a challenge to society. The authors harness the power of language to expose inequality, question institutional norms, and articulate alternative visions of agency and transformation. As these novels demonstrate, rhetoric is not only about persuasion or style; it is about shaping reality, defining power structures, and imagining new possibilities for individual and collective identity. In a nation still grappling with the legacies of colonialism, caste, economic disparity, and cultural conflict, the rhetorical strategies of Roy, Adiga, and Seth demand not only critical attention but also introspection. They remind us that fiction — particularly when grounded in rhetorical purpose — is capable of influencing how we think, empathize, and act. The rhetorical force of their narratives does not lie merely in what is said, but in how it is said, and to what end. As such, these works exemplify the profound potential of literary rhetoric in shaping public consciousness and advancing social discourse in the 21st century.

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