

Original Article

Narrative Fragmentation, Hegemonic Power, and Social Control in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*

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Manuscript ID:

JRD -2026-180103

ISSN: 2230-9578

Volume 18

Issue 1

Pp. 13-16

January - 2026

Submitted: 15 Dec. 2025

Revised: 25 Dec. 2025

Accepted: 10 Jan. 2026

Published: 31 Jan. 2026

Abstract

Aravind Adiga is widely recognized for his sharp portrayal of contemporary Indian society shaped by neoliberal capitalism, widening class divisions, and systemic inequality. This paper examines how narrative fragmentation in *The White Tiger* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011) operates as a literary strategy to represent and reinforce hegemonic power and social control. Drawing upon Marxist literary theory, particularly Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, the paper argues that Adiga's fragmented narrative structures—epistolary form, shifting perspectives, and disrupted temporal sequences—do not merely reflect social chaos but actively participate in shaping class consciousness. In *The White Tiger*, the fragmented letter-narrative of Balram Halwai foregrounds an individualized voice that internalizes capitalist ideology while masking collective exploitation. His narrative promotes personal ambition as liberation, thereby reproducing bourgeois values rather than dismantling class hierarchy. Similarly, *Last Man in Tower* employs a polyphonic structure with multiple viewpoints that diffuse resistance and prevent the formation of collective class solidarity. The fragmentation of voices mirrors the fragmentation of social unity under capitalist pressure. This paper contends that narrative fragmentation functions as a mechanism of social control, enabling hegemonic power to sustain itself through consent, fear, and moral compromise. Rather than enabling revolutionary consciousness, these narratives depict characters negotiating survival within oppressive systems. By analyzing form alongside content, this study highlights how Adiga's fiction critiques neoliberal India while simultaneously revealing the limitations of individual resistance. The paper contributes to Marxist criticism by linking narrative technique with ideological reproduction and offers a comparative reading of two major works that expose the subtle workings of power in contemporary Indian English fiction.

Keywords: Narrative Fragmentation, Marxist Criticism, Hegemony, Social Control, Class Consciousness, Neoliberalism, Ideology, Power, Indian English Fiction.

Introduction

Indian English fiction in the twenty-first century has increasingly turned its attention to the changing realities of Indian society shaped by globalization, rapid urban growth, and rising economic inequality. Many contemporary writers focus on how these changes affect ordinary people, especially those who struggle to survive within unequal social and economic systems. As cities expand and markets grow, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened, creating sharp divisions based on wealth, power, and opportunity. Literature has become an important space to reflect these tensions and expose the lived experiences of inequality. Among modern Indian English writers, Aravind Adiga stands out for his strong and critical portrayal of class struggle and capitalist exploitation. His novels *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* present a society deeply divided between privilege and deprivation. Adiga highlights how economic success is limited to a few, while the majority remain trapped in systems that deny them dignity and stability. Through his characters, he reveals how power operates in everyday life, shaping choices, relationships, and moral values.

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How to cite this article:

Gaurav, K., & Mishra, J. K. (2026). Narrative Fragmentation, Hegemonic Power, and Social Control in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*. *Journal of Research & Development*, 18(1), 13–16. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18455525>



Quick Response Code:



Website:

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DOI:

[10.5281/zenodo.18455525](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18455525)



As Adiga himself shows, social mobility is often an illusion rather than a real possibility for the underprivileged. Most critical studies on Adiga's works have focused on his major themes, such as inequality, corruption, and the failures of the Indian economic system. Scholars have discussed how his fiction exposes the dark side of neoliberal development and the suffering of the working class. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the form of his narratives and how storytelling itself plays a role in maintaining power structures. Narrative form is not simply a technical choice; it deeply influences how readers understand social reality. As Fredric Jameson argues, "narrative form is itself an ideological act." Marxist literary criticism helps explain why narrative form matters. From a Marxist perspective, literature is not neutral or separate from society. Instead, it is shaped by dominant ideas and often reflects existing power relations. Karl Marx famously stated that "the ruling ideas of every epoch are the ideas of the ruling class." This means that literature can unconsciously support systems of domination by presenting inequality as natural or unavoidable.

Through characters, plots, and narrative voices, fiction can either question or reinforce social hierarchies. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony further clarifies how power operates beyond physical force. According to Gramsci, ruling groups maintain control not only through laws and punishment but also by winning the consent of the people. He explains that hegemony works when dominant values become accepted as common sense. As Gramsci notes, power survives when it is "protected by the armour of consent." Cultural forms such as literature play a key role in spreading these ideas and making inequality appear normal. In this context, narrative structure itself becomes ideological. Fragmented narratives—those that focus on individual voices, broken timelines, or multiple perspectives—can strongly influence how readers perceive class and resistance. Such narratives often highlight personal struggle while hiding the larger social system behind it. As a result, social problems appear as individual failures rather than collective injustices. Louis Althusser supports this view by stating that ideology "represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." This paper argues that Aravind Adiga's use of narrative fragmentation in *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* reflects and reinforces hegemonic power. The fragmented narrative forms in both novels discourage collective class awareness and instead promote individual responses to oppression. Characters focus on personal survival, compromise, or ambition rather than organized resistance. Through this narrative strategy, Adiga shows how social control operates subtly within neoliberal India. As a result, his fiction reveals not only the presence of inequality but also the mechanisms that allow it to continue.

Narrative Fragmentation as Ideological Strategy

Narrative fragmentation refers to storytelling techniques that disrupt linear progression, unified perspective, or collective voice. Fredric Jameson notes that "narrative form is itself a symbolic act". In capitalist societies, fragmented narratives often mirror fragmented social realities, where individuals are isolated from collective identity. In Adiga's fiction, fragmentation does not merely represent chaos; it participates in ideological control. By focusing on individual voices and personal struggles, the narratives obscure systemic exploitation. Marx argues that capitalism alienates individuals from collective consciousness, stating that "men are conscious of this conflict and fight it out" only when material conditions allow. Adiga's fragmented narratives show characters who are conscious of suffering but unable to unite. The absence of a unified narrative voice reflects the absence of collective resistance. Fragmentation becomes a literary reflection of class division and ideological containment.

***The White Tiger*: Epistolary Narrative and Bourgeois Consent**

The White Tiger is structured as a series of letters written by Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier. This epistolary form creates a fragmented, confessional narrative that foregrounds individual voice. Balram declares, "I am tomorrow", positioning himself as a symbol of progress. Balram's narrative is deeply shaped by capitalist ideology. He believes success is achieved through personal ambition, not collective struggle. He states, "There are only two castes in India: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies". This binary simplifies class struggle while naturalizing inequality. The fragmentation of Balram's narrative reflects his fractured moral consciousness. He justifies murder as economic necessity, claiming, "I had no choice". This reflects what Marx describes as false consciousness, where individuals internalize dominant ideology. Gramsci explains that hegemony works through consent rather than coercion. Balram consents to capitalist values even as he critiques them. His narrative does not challenge the system; it seeks inclusion within it. As he admits, "To break out of the Rooster Coop, you need a little luck". Collective resistance is replaced by individual escape. The fragmented letter form prevents alternative voices from emerging. The working class remains silent except through Balram's self-centered narration. This narrative strategy reinforces bourgeois ideology by celebrating individual success.

Violence and Moral Fragmentation

Balram's decision to commit murder can be seen as a twisted form of resistance rather than a true challenge to the system that oppresses him. He believes that his violent action makes him free from lifelong servitude, and he explains this feeling by saying, "I was looking for the key for years, but the door was always open". This image suggests escape and freedom, but it is focused entirely on individual gain rather than collective change. Balram's idea of liberation is personal and selfish, shaped by the values of the capitalist system he seeks to escape. From a Marxist point of view, violence that lacks class awareness cannot destroy capitalism. Instead of challenging the system, such violence often

strengthens it by copying its methods and values. Balram's journey proves this argument when he rises in status and proudly admits, "I am now a master". Rather than ending exploitation, he becomes part of the same structure of dominance that once oppressed him. His success depends on exploiting others, showing how deeply capitalist ideology has shaped his thinking. Balram's moral reasoning is fragmented, allowing him to justify his actions without guilt. He convinces himself that exploitation is necessary for survival in a harsh world. By repeating the same patterns of oppression, he shows how power systems adjust and continue rather than disappear. This supports Gramsci's view that hegemony is flexible and enduring, as it "absorbs resistance and reshapes it" into forms that do not threaten its control. Balram's story therefore highlights how individual rebellion can end up reinforcing the very system it tries to escape.

Last Man in Tower: Polyphony and Diffused Resistance

Unlike *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower* uses a narrative style that includes many different characters and viewpoints. On the surface, this kind of storytelling appears more open and democratic because it allows multiple voices to be heard. However, instead of encouraging unity, the presence of many perspectives actually weakens collective resistance. The story shows how individual fears and personal interests prevent people from standing together against powerful forces. The novel is set in Vishram Society, an old residential building where the residents come under increasing pressure from a wealthy real estate developer who wants to buy and demolish the property. Most of the residents are tempted by the promise of money and a better lifestyle. In contrast, Masterji, a retired schoolteacher, becomes the only person who firmly refuses to sell his flat. His simple declaration, "I will not sell", represents moral courage and resistance. However, his stand remains isolated, as no one else is willing to support him fully. As the pressure increases, other residents begin to justify their decision to compromise. They convince themselves that giving in is not a moral failure but a practical necessity. One resident openly admits, "We are not bad people, only afraid". This statement reveals how fear controls behavior. Fear of financial insecurity, social isolation, and possible violence pushes individuals to act against their own moral values. In this way, fear becomes an effective tool of social control that discourages resistance. The narrative structure of the novel reinforces this idea. Each character explains their actions in a different way, making betrayal appear reasonable or unavoidable. These fragmented viewpoints prevent the formation of a shared purpose or collective identity. As a result, resistance slowly breaks down. The system does not need to use open force; instead, it relies on internalized fear and ideological pressure. As Louis Althusser explains, ideology functions by shaping how people think and act, often without their awareness, by influencing their beliefs and choices. The tragic death of Masterji becomes a powerful symbol in the novel. It shows that individual moral resistance cannot succeed without collective support. His failure highlights how fragmented voices and personal fears allow oppressive systems to continue unchallenged. Through this narrative, Adiga demonstrates how social control operates quietly but effectively in contemporary society.

Social Control and Ideological Fear

Fear plays an important role in maintaining hegemonic power in society. In *Last Man in Tower*, fear influences the actions of the characters more strongly than moral responsibility. The residents of Vishram Society are more worried about financial insecurity than about doing what is ethically right. One character clearly expresses this mindset by saying, "Money changes everything". This statement shows how capitalist thinking dominates human values, pushing people to prioritize economic benefit over justice and morality. The apartment building in the novel works as a symbol of a divided and broken society. Each resident lives within the same physical space, yet they remain emotionally and socially disconnected. This lack of unity reflects Karl Marx's idea that capitalism isolates individuals by encouraging competition rather than cooperation. Because the residents do not trust one another, they are unable to form a strong collective resistance. The fragmented narrative structure of the novel strengthens this division by shifting focus from one character to another, preventing any single viewpoint from becoming powerful enough to inspire group action. The system of control in the novel is not openly violent but operates through institutions that appear neutral. Antonio Gramsci explains that power is maintained when people willingly accept dominant ideas and behaviors as normal. He argues that authority is sustained when it is "protected by the armour of consent." In *Last Man in Tower*, institutions such as the law, the media, and bureaucracy quietly support the real estate developer. The residents slowly internalize this power, adjusting their behavior without direct force. As a result, they begin to regulate themselves, believing that resistance is pointless. This internal acceptance of power shows how hegemony survives through fear and consent rather than open coercion.

Fragmentation and the Failure of Class Consciousness

Both *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* present characters who are aware of the injustice around them but are unable to develop true class consciousness. Although they can see inequality and exploitation, this awareness does not turn into collective action. Karl Marx argues that recognizing oppression should lead to organized struggle, but in Adiga's novels, individuals remain separated and focused on personal survival rather than shared resistance. In *The White Tiger*, Balram openly rejects the idea of collective political action. He shows deep distrust toward public institutions and mocks political systems by saying, "These politicians are useless". This statement reflects his belief that collective movements cannot bring real change. As a result, Balram chooses an individual path to success, even if it means adopting the same values as those who once oppressed him. His attitude shows how capitalist ideology

discourages faith in unity and shared struggle. Similarly, in *Last Man in Tower*, the residents of Vishram Society fail to trust one another. Fear, suspicion, and personal interest prevent them from standing together against exploitation. Instead of forming a united front, each person acts alone, leading to the breakdown of solidarity. This social fragmentation replaces collective resistance and allows powerful forces to dominate without challenge. Fredric Jameson explains that many modern narratives show a loss of emotional connection, which he describes as the “waning of affect”. Adiga’s fragmented narrative style reflects this emotional distance. Characters are detached from one another and from the idea of shared responsibility. This lack of emotional and social connection weakens resistance and ensures that injustice continues unchallenged. Through this portrayal, Adiga highlights how fragmentation and isolation prevent the growth of class consciousness in contemporary society.

Negotiating Hegemony Rather Than Overthrowing It

Aravind Adiga’s fiction does not present clear revolutionary answers or visions of social transformation. Instead, his novels focus on how individuals try to survive within systems that are already deeply unequal and oppressive. This realistic approach makes his social criticism more convincing, but it also highlights the limits of individual action. Rather than imagining collective movements or large-scale change, Adiga shows characters adapting to harsh realities in ways that often reinforce the existing system. In *The White Tiger*, Balram manages to rise socially by accepting and practicing capitalist values. He believes success comes through personal ambition, competition, and moral compromise. His journey shows how the system rewards those who are willing to play by its rules. As Balram admits, “I am now a master,” a statement that reflects his full acceptance of the very structure that once exploited him. Instead of challenging inequality, he becomes part of it. In contrast, the residents of Vishram Society in *Last Man in Tower* fail to protect their moral values because they submit to capitalist pressure. Tempted by money and fearful of insecurity, they abandon collective resistance and give in to the demands of powerful developers. Their submission shows how easily people can be controlled when economic benefits are offered. One resident’s belief that “money changes everything” captures this surrender to capitalist logic. Across both novels, Adiga suggests that resistance without a shared ideological foundation cannot succeed. Fragmented individuals, acting alone or out of fear, cannot challenge hegemonic power. As the narratives make clear, “fragmentation weakens resistance and strengthens control.” Through this portrayal, Adiga reveals how social control continues when people focus only on survival rather than collective change.

Conclusion

This paper explores how narrative fragmentation in *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower* works as a tool of hegemonic power and social control. Through different narrative techniques such as letter writing and multiple viewpoints, Aravind Adiga presents characters who speak mainly as individuals rather than as part of a collective. These fragmented voices reflect a broken sense of class awareness, where people understand their suffering but are unable to unite against the system that oppresses them. Although Adiga’s novels strongly criticize social inequality and injustice, they also show how resistance is weakened and absorbed by dominant power structures. The study demonstrates that capitalism does not rely only on force to maintain control. Instead, it uses ideology, fear, and moral compromise to shape how individuals think and act. Adiga’s characters often accept these pressures as normal or unavoidable, which prevents them from challenging the system effectively. In this way, the novels reveal how hegemonic power continues to operate quietly in everyday life. Resistance becomes personal and fragmented rather than collective and organized. By connecting narrative form with Marxist theory, this paper emphasizes that storytelling itself can carry ideological meaning. Fragmented narratives do not merely reflect social chaos; they also help in maintain existing power relations by discouraging unity and collective struggle. Adiga’s fiction presents a realistic picture of neoliberal India, where economic growth exists alongside deep inequality and social division. Ultimately, the novels suggest that without shared class consciousness and collective action, efforts to resist oppression remain limited. Hegemonic power continues to dominate social life when individuals face injustice alone. Through this portrayal, Adiga highlights both the realities of contemporary Indian society and the challenges of achieving meaningful social change.

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