

# WORLD BANK LANGUAGE AND NEOLIBERAL GLOBAL CAPITALISM IN MOHSIN HAMID'S AND ARAVIND ADIGA'S 'LITERARY PROVOCATIONS'

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**Abstract** – According to Amitava Kumar, editor of the volume *World Bank Literature* (2002), the eponymous term is meant to be a ‘provocation’ rather than a ‘distinct referent’: the contributors are a mix of economists and humanities scholars who raise questions about the role of literary narratives in exposing the contradictions of what is publicly promoted and what is materially practiced by the World Bank and other international financial institutions in developing countries. After elaborating on the relationship between the World Bank and Indian society and culture, and on a possible engagement of postcolonial studies with the economic and political texts of multinational corporations, I consider two acclaimed novels, Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), focusing on the way they contribute to shaping counter-hegemonic narratives that participate in both constructing and reconstructing our understanding of global economic processes. Soon after the release of *The White Tiger*, Adiga declared that “provocation is one of the legitimate goals of literature”, and we understand this from the way he traces the transformation of the novel’s main character, Balram, his rise from rags to riches like the characters represented in official success stories of Rising Asia. However, the process of transformation exposes what is buried in the hegemonic discourse: violence and crime. While narrating his alleged success story in the form of a self-help book, Hamid’s unnamed character embodies a biting satire of the formation of neoliberal subjectivity. In both novels, I analyse how literary provocation is conveyed through the subversion and re-discussion of the neoliberal entrepreneur within the rhetoric of global capitalism.

**Keywords:** World Bank; Mohsin Hamid; Aravind Adiga; rising Asia entrepreneurs; literary provocation.

## 1. The World Bank, postcolonial studies, and India

In the introduction to his edited book *World Bank Literature* (2002), Indian writer and journalist Amitava Kumar sustains that the eponymous term is meant to be a ‘provocation’ rather than a ‘distinct referent’: it is a term that is designed to invite inquiry into globalisation, the economy, and literature. The contributors are an eclectic mix of economists and humanities scholars who raise questions about the role of literary narratives in exposing the contradictions of what is publicly promoted and what is materially practiced

by the World Bank and other international financial institutions in developing countries.

The World Bank is taken as an agent and as a metaphor that helps us concretise the wider context of global capitalism. As Pizer writes in his review of the book,

[w]hile a plethora of works on the literature of the Southern Hemisphere, where globalization has had its most egregious effects, elucidate the resistance of the ‘subaltern’ in fiction, art, and music to rapacious international capitalism and its national and local agents, the worldwide but usually American based firms and institutions themselves are rarely subject to a critical reading by humanities scholars. (Pizer 2005, p. 330)

Kumar hopes for “a new and balanced engagement of postcolonial studies with the social, economic, and political texts of the global agencies and multinational corporations contested by many different actors today” (Kumar 2002, p. 10). He believes that literature cannot be sealed from the issues of economics and activism and pushes the issue forward making a truly provocative question: “Can World Bank Literature be a new name for postcolonial studies?” (Kumar 2002, p. 11) The provocation consists in inviting, or better challenging, scholars of postcolonial studies and writers to fully engage in the New Economic Policies that have invested the former colonies of the European empires after Independence. He mainly refers to Asia, and India in particular, which stands as the World Bank’s single largest borrower since its institution.

As a kind of reverse operation, which seems to combine and complement Kumar’s cultural project, stands the 2007 “Manifesto for a Post-Colonial International Business and Management Studies”, whose subtitle is “A Provocation”. It makes a call to scholars in international management and business studies to embrace postcolonial theory and allow it to provide an interrogation of the ontological, epistemological, methodological, and institutional resources currently dominating the field. The provocation regards the odd couple business/postcolonial studies, since they have always been considered worlds apart without possibilities for a dialogue. The authors affirm that international management and business studies (IMBS) have ignored, with a few very notable exceptions, the field of postcolonial theory (PCT), whereas this same theory “has wrought a profound effect on the academic endeavours of literary studies, history, anthropology and other humanities disciplines” (Westwood, Gavin 2007, p. 247). Their intention “is not to ‘insert’ a post-colonial sensitivity into IMBS [...], capable of being kept at the margins as a ‘perspective’; rather, it is to mobilize the theoretical and political resources of PCT so as to bring about a significant reconfiguration of the field (Westwood, Gavin 2007, p. 247). For example, as the North/South divide is radically understudied in IMBS, PCT would insist on rectifying such neglect and

analysing the consequences of that divide both for businesses and organisations.

The authors recognise the importance of the study of inequalities, neoliberal reforms, and developmental projects within the relationship between postcolonial countries and the former imperial nations, focusing on the consequences of global policies on local economies and local workers in terms of growth, debt, and land dispossession. Amitava Kumar shares this research approach and has collected writings that range from studies on globalisation and poverty to the role of IMF and the World Bank in women's economic resistance in West Africa and the narratives of the East Asian financial crisis, as well as the study of developing fictions regarding the presence of the 'tribal' in the new Indian writing in English. As for the essays that mostly focus on the World Bank reports and actions in developing countries, Kumar mainly refers to Asia and particularly to India. The institution has been working in the Subcontinent since the 1950s and has provided the country with over \$300 billion in loans and grants. India has received financial assistance and support for the implementation of several development projects, including investments in infrastructure such as roads, ports, and power plants; programs to improve education and health services; and initiatives to promote economic growth and reduce poverty. The Bank has also supported the government's efforts to reform the power sector and improve the business climate by simplifying regulations and increasing transparency.

Edward Mason and Robert Asher, in a history of the Bank's first three decades, affirmed that India and the Bank have grown up together: "It is no exaggeration to say that India has influenced the Bank as much as the Bank has influenced India" (Mason, Asher 1973, p. 675). Catherine Caufield, writing in the mid-1990s, remarked of the then half-century that the Bank and India had travelled together: "As greater and greater sums of money passed between them, the Bank succeeded in putting its imprint on India, but India's imprint on the Bank is just as deep" (Caufield 1996, p. 23).

Overall, the World Bank's engagement with India has helped to improve the living standards of its people. Yet, in the course of time, the World Bank and IMF's programmes have faced harsh criticism, including concerns about the environmental and social impact of some projects, and the bank's accountability and transparency. In 1993, Michel Chossudovsky wrote that India was under IMF rule:

Indirect rule in India has a long history: the Rajputs and princely states had a fair degree of autonomy in relation to the British colonial government. In contrast, under the IMF-World Bank tutelage, the union minister of finance reports directly to 1818 H Street NW, Washington, DC, bypassing the parliament and the democratic process (Chossudovsky 1993, p. 385).

Such an ironic consideration found evidence in the consequences deriving from the liberalisation of labour market sponsored by the Indian government and the international financial institutions, which tended to “reinforce despotic social relations thereby providing, in practice, greater legitimacy to caste exploitation, semi-slavery and child labour” (Chossudovsky 1993, p. 386).

In the last decades, there have been increasing protests, civil battles, and radical actions by non-profit organisations and political groups for the safeguard of local economies, of peasants and farmers facing many difficulties with loans, and against the construction of dams and factories financed by IMF and the World Bank. Let us only think of the anti-dam group Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement), which saw the activist Medha Patkar and writer Arundhati Roy and others in the process of bringing attention to the ecological devastation caused by the project of the dam building along the Narmada River. Arundhati Roy wrote *The Greater Common Good* and *The Cost of Living* about those issues, and in 1999 she commented on the World Bank loans in these terms: “India is in a situation today where it pays back more money to the Bank in interest and repayment instalments that it receives from it. We are forced to incur new debts in order to be able to repay our old ones” (Roy 1999b, p. 29). In Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, the low-caste character Velutha perceives his environment and his river in the Sundarbans as something that significantly changes over time, eventually smelling of “shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans” (Ghosh 2004, p. 13).

The question of debt and loans has penetrated Indian society and culture due to the still ongoing relationship between India and the World Bank supported by current Prime Minister Modi and symbolised by the fact that on 3 May 2023, the institution selected ‘corporate czar’ Ajay Banga, the former Mastercard CEO, as its first Indian-origin President. In October 2022, former President Malpass had praised India for its technological achievement and extended digitisation. Prime Minister Modi said, citing the World Bank, that India has become a leader in ensuring social security through digitisation after he launched 75 Digital Banking Units (DBUs) across 75 districts in the country: “Even the most successful people in the field of technology, the experts of the tech world are appreciating this system in India. They too are amazed by its success” (Sabarwal 2022). At a World Bank event in April 2023, Modi emphasised that global institutions have an important role to play in encouraging countries across the world. Referring to the World Bank Group’s proposed increase in climate finance from 26% to 35%, he said that “[a]dequate financing methods need to be worked out for behavioural initiatives too. A show of support by the World Bank towards behavioural initiatives such as Mission LiFE will have a multiplier effect” (Mohan 2023). Under the event title “Making it Personal. How Behavioural Change Can Tackle Climate Change”, Modi affirmed the position of India within the institution as no longer a borrower country with a high debt to pay back, but as an influential

shareholder – the seventh largest shareholder in the multilateral lender – that can contribute to vital projects and actions on a global level.

The writers I consider here, Mohsin Hamid and Aravind Adiga, were respectively born in Pakistan and India, and have both experienced study and work in prestigious Western academies and international financial institutions and journals before becoming full-time writers. Their writings seem to contribute in a significant way to the corpus of World Bank literature since they have produced narratives embedded with the economic discourse of neoliberal capitalism, with its old and new lexicon, using satire and innovative stylistic features to express such a discourse and to criticise it. They also employ irony and sarcasm to narrate questions of development and technological advancement of 'Rising Asia', and to show the obscure side of that kind of rhetorical construction.

## 2. The language of World Bank (literature)

*Bankspeak: The Language of World Bank Reports, 1946-2012*, the 2015 study conducted by Franco Moretti and Dominique Pestre, seems to be quite revealing of the way a whole, autonomous vocabulary, not by chance reminiscent of the Orwellian Newspeak, is identified as belonging to the financial institution, with its phases of evolution and passages from different semantic areas.

The two scholars consider the full texts of the World Bank yearly Reports as their corpus, excluding the budgets and all financial tables. On a general consideration,

the words most frequently used give an impression of extreme stability. Seven are near the top at any given time: three of them are nouns – *bank*, *loan/s*, and *development* – and four are adjectives: *fiscal* (especially frequent after 1975), *economic*, *financial* (alternating with *fiscal* in first or second place from the mid-1980's on) and *private*. (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 1)

After considering the adjectives too, among which *agricultural* and *rural* are the most frequent, at least until 1996, the authors conclude that

the message is clear: the World Bank lends money for the purpose of stimulating development, notably in the rural South, and is therefore involved with loans, investments, and debts. [...] yet, behind this façade of uniformity, a major metamorphosis has taken place. (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 2)

Confronting two Reports on the same country, Congo, in 1958 and in 2008, the authors notice that almost another language, in both semantics and grammar, has been used. In fact, compared with the style of the Reports of the first two

decades, that of the last twenty years “becomes much more codified, self-referential, and detached from everyday language” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 2).

Before the 1990s, the language refers to concrete actions, loans, plans, investments in infrastructure that will lead to the economic development and social well-being of the developing countries. There are mainly three types of social actors in the texts: *states and governments; companies, banks, and industries; engineers, technicians, and experts*. Moreover, “[d]evelopment proceeds in stages, and its ‘take off’ is triggered by the production of raw materials, the creation of infra-structures, and an agricultural sector oriented towards exports” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 3). Whereas factuality is the main feature representing the language used in the early decades, in the last twenty years there has been a shift to three new semantic clusters that have to do with finance, management and poverty reduction, and governance.

Between 1990 and 2010, the Reports saw the rise of financial language and management discourse, made up of “an acronym-obsessed language” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 6) regarding, especially, the question of poverty reduction. Poverty is no longer explained and illustrated using concrete terms, but has become ‘the problem’, and the nouns that define its semantic area are not *bank, cost, income* etc., but rather *focus, key, framework, approach, management, policies, programs*, all the key-steps to reduce it. The semantic cluster of *governance* “includes a series of terms which express a sense of compassion, generosity, rectitude, empathy with the world’s problems” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 7). These ethical problems were almost absent in the first decades, but they have become omnipresent since the 1990s, together with nouns and adjectives like *responsible, responsibility, effort, commitment, involvement, sharing, care*.

Thus, the Bank’s credo is that of “enhancing and promoting what is appropriate, equitable and sound” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). It is committed to “achieving and communicating results, creating opportunities for people in developing countries” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). There is an overall feeling of dedication and commitment: “the Bank’s sense of responsibility is as admirable as its exceptional efficiency” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). The authors quote the opening sentence of the 2012 Report: “The Bank is making progress both internally and in the field, and it continues to improve the way it serves its client countries” (Moretti, Pestre 2015, p. 9). It is rather clear that there is a mixture of ethics, moral behaviour, and business (clients). The Bank suggests that business and ethics are no longer opposite terms, but that ethics is at the heart of the business world today. And this is expressed with an abstract language that lacks specificity and is perfectly inscribed within the field of today’s corporate discourse.

Indian fiction in English has begun, from the early 1990s, to talk about that middle-class of Indian software writers ‘wired’ to the circuits of global production in the US. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995),

Pankaj Mishra's *The Romantics* (1999), Hari Kunzru's *Transmission* (2004), Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007), and more recently Vauhini Vara's *The Immortal King Rao* (2022), to name just a few, explore how immigration and the experience of working for multinational companies in India, Pakistan and abroad, have affected people's lives, including the controversial and problematic aspects of being suspended between different worlds, where the new world to settle in for the Asian immigrants is no longer the UK but North America, and for the upper-middle class the main sector of employment is the American corporate world of finance and information technology. Furthermore, writers and intellectuals have started to critically reflect upon the new economic configuration of the Subcontinent, from a local and global perspective, and within the linguistic framework of the World Bank's discourse.

The analysis of Hamid's and Adiga's novels allows us to observe and recognise the application of Bankspeak in different ways. It is possible to better identify the vocabulary of the first period of the Bank Reports with Hamid's novel, whereas Adiga's *White Tiger* is more connected with the recent language of finance, with new market forms and economies regarding information technology, outsourcing, digitisation. Both novels allude to and critically reconfigure one particularly important trope of neoliberal globalisation: 'Rising Asia', or the turn towards Asia as an ascendant geopolitical and economic superpower conglomerate. The authors take up the Rising Asia narratives of the recent years, developed in books and TV series by authors like, for example, Thai tycoon Vikrom Kromadit, whose best-seller and autobiography *Be a Better Man* (2019) recounts how he has become one of the most successful Asian businessmen in developing industrial areas for large-scale plans. Stories of the kind are based on an acritical optimism in the myth of ascendance for Asia. As Gui underlines, the two writers here examined, in different ways and styles, render this trope "through an artistic semblance that reiterates but also resignifies its idiom and vocabulary" (Gui 2013, p. 178). This means a "negation of an empirical – and entrepreneurial – world that is too much with us" (Gui 2013, p. 175): Adiga's and Hamid's works can be considered

as acts of narrative renovation: key terms and concepts from neoliberalism and globalization are appropriated and resignified as the novels interweave their protagonists' development as Rising Asia entrepreneurs with devices and tropes from traditional literary genres, namely the Gothic tale (in *The White Tiger*) and the story of first love (in *How to Get Filthy Rich*). (Gui 2013, pp. 174-175)

### 3. Mohsin Hamid's provocative 'guide' to upward mobility

*How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* fuses the conventional “rags to riches story” and its predictable narrative pattern with the immediacy of the self-help book. Hamid identifies a rapidly developing, booming South Asia, with its large aspirational population, growing consumption, changing tastes, excessive capital, and seemingly endless business opportunities, as the new site of capitalist fantasies. The novel traces the rise of its main protagonist, “you”, who is, just like all the other characters in the narrative, unnamed. The ambitious third child of a poor family, “you” migrates with his parents and siblings to an unspecified city – Lahore in Pakistan, maybe – in search for a better life, and climbs the economic and social ladder thanks to his water supply business through which he achieves material success. Instead of a bildungsroman narrated in third or first person that one might expect from such a story, we encounter a dramatic monologue. From the beginning of the novel, the narrator speaks directly to the reader in a tone that is by turns familiar, humorous, and insinuating. The unnamed narrator begins his narrative as follows: “Look, unless you’re writing one, a self-help book is an oxymoron. You read a self-help book so someone who isn’t yourself can help you, that someone being the author (Hamid 2014, p. 3). Each chapter is framed as a chapter in a self-help book and organised as a logical sequence of practical steps one needs to take to become “filthy rich” (e.g., “Move to the city”, “Get an Education”, “Don’t Fall in Love”, “Work for Yourself”, “Avoid Idealists”, “Learn from a Master”, but also “Be Prepared to Use Violence”, “Befriend a Bureaucrat”, “Patronize the Artists of War”, “Dance with Debt”, “Have an Exit Strategy”). Thus, it seems that this work cannot really help you become rich and live happily ever after because irony, sarcasm, and paradox pervade the book from the very first page and, especially in the last phases of the story, help vanishes and business problems increase.

The narrator, while not coincident with the author “Mohsin Hamid”, is represented as the persona of a writer of a self-help book who is writing a novel. Thus, “you” refers both to the reader and a character in the text, and the reader is denied the safety of distance, becoming the object of satire as well. Satire is firstly addressed to the genre of self-help books, recalling and critically revising works like *Retire Rich* by P.V. Subramanyam (2019), or *The Richest Engineer* by Abhishek Kumar (2019), *I Will Teach You How to Be Rich* by Ramit Sethi (2009), *How to Be Your Financial Planner in 10 Steps* by Manish Chouhan (2013), *You Can Get Rich Too: With Goal-Based Investing* by P.V. Subramanyam and M. Pattabiraman (2016), just to name some of the most successful and recent books of the kind published in India.

Hamid’s narrator is the counter-voice of that mainstream narrative and can explain what it means to become filthy rich in rising Asia, with irony and cynicism:



We exist in a financial universe that is subject to massive gravitational pulls from the states. States tug at us. States bend us. And tirelessly, states seek to determine our orbits. You might therefore assume that the most reliable path to becoming filthy rich is to activate your faster-than-light marketing drive and leap into business nebulas as remote as possible from the state's imperial economic grip. But you would be wrong. Entrepreneurship in the barbaric wastes furthest from state power is a fraught endeavour, a constant battle, a case of kill or be killed, with little guarantee of success. (Hamid 2014, p. 140)

According to Angelia Poon,

[t]he object of the novel's satire is the capitalist, neoliberal notion of the self that is predicated on an overweening sense of control and ultimate agency. [...] Neoliberal subjectivity endorses the care and transformation of the self in order to take best advantage of a market economy. With material affluence as the goal, the means to achieving that is often seen as simply a matter of individual choice and personal will – to be entrepreneurial and enterprising, for example – rather than any advantage one might attribute to traditional indices of identity like race, ethnicity, gender, or family background. (Poon 2017, p. 141)

Hamid employs the vocabulary of factuality and concreteness belonging to the World Bank's early Reports in the description of how the protagonist has reached material affluence, revealing the city's infrastructures, the development of the urban area, the business of water supply, and the transformation of the metropolis, with its growth of wealth, but also with the widening of the rich-poor divide. As an example, the protagonist's arrival in the city is described as follows:

Dirt streets give way to paved ones, potholes grow less frequent and soon all disappear, and the kamikaze rush of oncoming traffic vanishes, to be replaced by the enforced peace of the dual carriageway. Electricity makes its appearance, first in passing you slip below a steel parade of high voltage giants, then later in the form of wires running at bus-top eye level on either side of the road, and finally in streetlights and shop signs and glorious, magnificent billboards. Buildings go from mud to brick to concrete, then shoot up to an unimaginable four stories, even five. (Hamid 2014, p. 14)

The choice of water as the commodity with which the protagonist makes his money is not accidental given that water is symbolically significant on so many levels. In the rising Asia of the novel, unequal access to water strikingly reveals the gap between the rich and the poor. Those who can afford it buy bottled water rather than drink the sewage-contaminated water from the city's network of pipes and taps. "You" first enters this market the only way he can – by supplying fraudulent bottled water: "In your case you've set up a small business, a workhorse S in the thunderous economic herd of what bankers and policy makers call SMEs" (Hamid 2014, p. 98). As a scarce and precious

commodity, the provision of which the state is content to outsource to third-party private companies, water also stands as a potent symbolic reminder of market-based policies and the neoliberal ideology's reach:

Becoming filthy rich requires a degree of unsqueamishness, whether in rising Asia or anywhere else. For wealth comes from capital, and capital comes from labor, and labor comes from equilibrium, from calories in chasing calories out, an inherent, in-built leanness, the leanness of biological machines that must be bent to your will with some force if you are to loosen your financial belt and, sighingly, expand. (Hamid 2014, p. 120)

The protagonist expands his business from selling bottled water of dubious quality to securing a licence as a municipal vendor of water, navigating in the process threats from competitors and a corrupt state bureaucracy, before finally leveraging on debt to scale up and dominate the water market. He admits that

many skills, as every successful entrepreneur knows, cannot be taught at school. And where money-making is concerned, nothing compresses the time frame needed to leap from my-shit-there-until-it-rains poverty to which-of-my-toilets-shall-I-use affluence like an apprenticeship with someone who already has the angles all figured out. (Hamid 2014, p. 78)

For that last step, the protagonist's "business is quantified, digitized, and jacked into a global network of finance, [his] activities subsumed with barely a ripple in a collective mathematical pool of ever-changing current and future cash flows" (Hamid 2014, p. 183).

With each change, the unnamed protagonist is thus further removed from his fixed business and drawn deeper into a fluid, insubstantial world of financial flows and capital circulation. Hamid frequently uses the style of moral teachings that, according to Bhabha, pertains to the pedagogical aspect of neoliberal rationality and to the vocabulary of the last decades of the World Bank's Reports. It is reproduced here with the narrator's truisms and within an ironic framework. With *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Hamid's intent is to capture and reflect capitalist realities. In this regard, the text may be read as an endorsement of what Mark Fisher has termed "capitalist realism" or "a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009, p. 16; emphasis in original). It is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher 2009, p. 2). In mobilising the discourse of self-help and the stylistic features of that genre, Hamid has written a novel of capitalist realism that reflects upon what it means for a postcolonial country to live in the present historical moment under the influence and support of international

financial institutions and within the framework of globalisation and neoliberalism.

#### 4. The provocative neoliberal entrepreneur in *The White Tiger*

Soon after the release of *The White Tiger* in 2008, Aravind Adiga declared that “provocation is one of the legitimate goals of literature” (Rana 2008). This is certainly true for his novel, for the way he traces the transformation of the main character, Balram Halway, his rise from rags to riches, and like Hamid's protagonist, his transformation and achievement of economic success reflecting the stories of rising Asia. However, the process of transformation exposes what is buried in the hegemonic discourse and official narratives of successful economic development in neoliberal times: violence, crime, and corruption. Halway's story embodies a biting satire of the formation of neoliberal subjectivity, and literary provocation is conveyed through the subversion and re-discussion of the Indian entrepreneur within the rhetoric of global capitalism.

Balram Haway calls his native village the Darkness, whereas Bangalore, the city, represents the Light; the story is told in the first person in the form of letters written to the Chinese Prime Minister, Mr. Jiabao, who is coming to India on an official visit. Whereas in Hamid's novel the story proceeds following a linear narrative time and we read about the unknown narrator's bad deeds and misfortunes towards the end of his story in the chapter called “Find an Exit Strategy”, in *The White Tiger* the protagonist confesses his crime (he killed his master) from the very beginning:

I could gloat that I am not just any murderer but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father), and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer. But I don't want to go on about myself. You should hear some of these Bangalore entrepreneurs – my start-up has got contract with American Express, my start-up runs the software in this hospital in London, blah blah. I hate that whole fucking Bangalore attitude, I tell you. (Adiga 2008, p. 37)

The autodiegetic narrator explicitly identifies himself as a “white tiger,” i.e., a creature “that comes along only once in a generation” (Adiga 2008, p. 35), capable of breaking out of the “rooster coop” in which most of the Indian poor prefer to stay. As portrayed by Adiga, globalised India is still a place of abject poverty, but this poverty is now contextualised in finanscapes and mediascapes – recalling Arjun Appadurai's terminology (1996) – that not only create new dimensions of social inequality but also present new opportunities to reject and rise from poverty – if only to a few determined individuals, exceptional men

who stand out from the millions in their country and who cannot, or do not dare to, escape from social suffering:

Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness. (Adiga 2008, p. 11)

I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarth is your typical Indian village Paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables and lentils, will be found, when examined with tape measures and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organizations whose treaties our prime Minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends! (Adiga 2008, p. 16)

Here we notice how the narrator makes use of the typical Bankspeak of the early decades: the ironic description of India's advancement under the control of international organisations reflects the programmes of development of the rural areas and its connection with the World Bank and IMF. But poverty, as Balram shows, is present everywhere, even in the 'light', in the city. You need to become a talented entrepreneur to escape from it. He addresses the Chinese Prime Minister with audacity – eye to eye as members of Asian nations that have inherited the power of the West:

All India Radio lady announcer said, 'Mr. Jiabao wants to meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of their success from their own lips'. [...] Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (Adiga 2008, pp. 175-176)

Irony and paradox concentrate on the contrast between the real things that India still does not have and the salvific, redeeming figure of the entrepreneur, the future of the nation:

Apparently, Sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the field of technology. And these entrepreneurs – we entrepreneurs – have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now.

You hope to learn how to make a few Chinese entrepreneurs, that why you're visiting. That made me feel good. (Adiga 2008, pp. 2-3)

[...] I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore.

By telling you my life's story.

See, when you come to Bangalore, and stop at a traffic light, some boy will run up to your car and knock on your window, while holding up a bootlegged copy of an American business book, wrapped carefully in cellophane and with a title like:

**TEN SECRETS OF BUSINESS SUCCESS!**

or

**BECOME AN ENTREPRENEUR IN SEVEN EASY DAYS!**

Don't waste your money on those American books. They're so *yesterday*. I am tomorrow. (Adiga 2008, p. 4)

Balram has been kept as a despised and ridiculed servant for most of his life until he murders his wealthy, westernised master and steals the money with which the latter has intended to bribe the government. With this money, Balram manages to re-invent himself as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore, "*the world's centre of Technology and Outsourcing*" (Adiga 2008, p. 1). As Korte comments,

Balram has a megalomaniac streak that makes him appear ridiculous at times. However, the attributes which he ascribes to himself at the novel's beginning – 'A Thinking Man', 'a self-taught entrepreneur', 'a man of action and change' – are justified by his actual achievements, even if the money he gained through his crime was a major catalyst for his final success. (Korte 2010/2011, p. 304)

Balram seems to perfectly adhere to the features of a new India, which Pranjali Sharma in the World Economic Forum website defines as follows:

India has long branded itself as the world's leading outsourcing destination for global companies, particularly for those in the technology sector – but in the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the time is ripe for the world's most populous country to reinvent itself. [...] Provided these favourable conditions can be met, India has unmatched potential to become the world's next Silicon Valley. (Sharma 2017)

As for Bangalore, one of the cities in which the novel is set, in 2017 it was ranked as

the most dynamic city in the world, based on factors like technology and innovation. While initially an outsourcing hub, the city has successfully moved away from this past focus, embracing entrepreneurship and emerging technologies. This has allowed it to position itself as India's tech capital. In 2018 alone, there were 153 new start-ups founded in the city. (Sharma 2017)

This is the world of Balram's movements and success, whose lexicon reflects the last evolution of Bankspeak, the passage from semantic areas of factuality and concreteness to more abstract and undefined terms:

I love my start-up – this chandelier, and this silver laptop, and these twenty-six Toyota Qualises – but honestly, I'll get bored of it sooner or later. I'm a first-gear man, Mr. Premier. In the end, I'll have to sell this start-up to some other moron – *entrepreneur*, I mean – and head into a new line. I'm thinking of real estate next. You see, I am always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'. The whole world will come to Bangalore tomorrow. Just drive to the airport and count the half-built glass and-steel boxes as you pass them. Look at the names of the American companies that are building them. And when all these Americans come here, where do you think they're all going to sleep? On the road? [...] The future of estate is Bangalore, Mr. Jiabao. You can join in the killing if you want – I'll help you out! (Adiga 2008, pp. 274-275)

In an interview with Vijay Rana for *The Indian Express*, Adiga explains the characteristics of the protagonist he has created:

What I am trying to do is to expand the literary canvas to include a member of an Indian class, who is increasingly being written out not only from literature but also from Hindi film. You will rarely see a character like Balram Halwai in the films, although you will see them all around Delhi. When I was writing this book one of my aims was to provoke and even to disturb some people because I think I have a journalist's instinct, unless something disturbs some people it can't be good. (Rana 2008)

The word *entrepreneur* is over-lexicalised throughout the novel, and according to Machin and Mayr (2012) this is to give extra weight and over-emphasis to the term. Adiga makes it the key figure of neoliberal capitalist economy and the personification of all controversial aspects related to development in rising Asia:

When you have heard the story of how I got to Bangalore and became one of its most successful (though probably least known) businessmen, you will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man. The century, more specifically, of the *yellow* and the *brown* man. (Adiga 2008, p. 4)

The entrepreneur's curse. He has to watch his business all the time. (Adiga 2008, p. 5)

The Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time. (Adiga 2008, p. 6)

Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay. [...] Calling myself Bangalore's least known success story isn't entirely true, I confess. About three years ago, when I became, briefly, a person of personal importance owing to an act of

entrepreneurship, a poster with my face on it found its way to every post office, railway station, and police station in this country. (Adiga 2008, p. 9)

*Entrepreneur* and *entrepreneurship* become umbrella terms that contain everything and are not really specified: apart from the practices of ascending the financial world, those words include strategies of survival, bribery, illegal projects, together with old stereotypes and dichotomies that constitute a threat for the real economic and social progress: rich vs poor, master vs servants, Indians vs Europeans, Asia vs the West.

Adiga has chosen to narrate what lies under the image of the neoliberal Indian entrepreneur in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and he tells such a story from the provocative point of view of an exceedingly charming, egotistical admitted murderer. The extreme provocation continues until the protagonist's final reflection:

I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat.  
I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant. (Adiga 2008, p. 276)

To conclude, *The White Tiger* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* contribute to shaping counter-hegemonic narratives that participate in both constructing and reconstructing our understanding of global economic processes. Using a language that belongs to those processes and to the specificity of the Indian subcontinent, the authors contest the validity of the same development programmes and reveal the ongoing contradictions of postcolonial society under the 'rule' of multinational companies and institutions.

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