

An analysis of themes of consumerism, globalization, and neocolonialism in Indian English fiction published after 1991

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Abstract:

This study investigates the profound thematic shifts within Indian English Fiction (IEF) published after the landmark 1991 economic liberalization. The paper specifically analyzes the literary engagement with the forces of globalization, the resulting proliferation of consumerism, and the critical diagnosis of residual neocolonialism. The central argument is that contemporary IEF acts as a crucial socio-cultural critique, portraying consumer culture as a new apparatus of hegemonic control. Through close readings of works by authors such as Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai, and others, the research demonstrates how fiction illuminates the replacement of political servitude with a complex economic subservience, thereby re-evaluating the promise of postcolonial modernity and progress in the neoliberal Indian state.

Key Words: Neocolonialism, Globalization, Neoliberal, Neoliberal, socio-cultural.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE 1991 WATERSHED AND THE LITERARY RESPONSE

A. The Historical Context: The Great Turnaround

The adoption of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1991, triggered by a balance of payments crisis, fundamentally dismantled the socialist-era "License Raj" and rapidly integrated India into the global market. This shift—characterized by liberalization, privatization, and globalization (LPG)—ushered in an era of unprecedented wealth creation, media saturation, and cultural flux.

B. Thematic Evolution in Post-1991 IEF

Pre-1991 IEF often addressed foundational themes like Partition, political corruption, and the legacy of the independence movement. Post-1991 fiction pivots to the consequences of global capitalism: urban alienation, the digital divide, the politics of transnational migration, and the new middle-class identity defined by market access.

C. Scope and Methodology

This analysis adopts a post-colonial theoretical framework combined with cultural materialism to examine how literary narratives articulate the material and ideological changes brought about by LPG. Key primary texts will be used as case studies to illustrate the arguments.

D. Central Thesis Statement

Post-1991 Indian English fiction offers a powerful, complex critique of neoliberal transformation, portraying **consumerism** as both an aspiration and an ideological trap, ultimately exposing the mechanisms through which globalization sustains and rearticulates pre-existing **neocolonial** power structures.

II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

This section establishes the critical vocabulary necessary for the analysis.

A. Defining Globalization and Cultural Flows

- **Arjun Appadurai's 'Scapes':** Globalization is understood through Appadurai's five dimensions (ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes). The paper will primarily focus on the **financescape** (the movement of capital) and the **mediascape** (the influx of global media and consumer images) and their impact on Indian culture, often resulting in **cultural hybridity** or sometimes **homogenization**.
- **The Global-Local Nexus:** The novels demonstrate the tension between the globalizing forces (MNCs, Western brands) and local resistance or adaptation (the Indianization of products and lifestyles).

B. Neocolonialism and Economic Subservience

- **Beyond Political Control:** Neocolonialism is defined, following Frantz Fanon and subsequent theorists, as the continued influence of developed nations and former colonial powers through economic leverage (debt, structural adjustment, trade agreements).
- **The Comprador Class:** Crucially, the paper will analyze how fiction portrays the rise of the **Comprador Elite**—a native bourgeoisie that facilitates foreign economic control. This class replaces the white colonial master but often perpetuates a more brutal, internalized exploitation of the poor.

C. Consumerism as Ideology

- **Conspicuous Consumption:** Drawing on Thorstein Veblen, consumerism is analyzed as a social practice where goods are acquired and displayed primarily to signal wealth and social status.
- **The Ethic of Excess:** This ideology replaces the Gandhian/Nehruvian ethic of scarcity, austerity, and socialist planning, marking a complete ideological shift in public life.

III. THE ZENITH OF CONSUMERISM: MAPPING NEW IDENTITIES AND SPACES

The literary representation of consumption is a direct narrative consequence of liberalization.

A. The Materialization of Aspiration: The New Middle Class

- Fiction depicts the new Indian middle class as being defined less by inherited values and more by their brand affiliation and purchasing power.
- **Case Study: Chetan Bhagat:** His popular novels (e.g., *Five Point Someone*, *One Night @ the Call Center*) often affirm this culture, showcasing young protagonists whose primary goals are career success, high salaries, and access to global lifestyles (cars, apartments, foreign trips). This popular genre reflects the widespread acceptance and normalization of consumerism.

B. The Aesthetics of the New Metropolis

- **The Mall and the Call Center:** These two spaces become symbolic of the new India. The shopping mall is depicted as a self-contained, air-conditioned fortress of consumption, physically and psychologically sealed off from the poverty outside. The call center is the workplace of cultural schizophrenia.
- *Example:* In call center novels, employees must adopt 'Western' names (e.g., 'Jennifer' or 'Mike') and American accents, illustrating the ultimate commodification of identity—a worker sells not just their labor, but their performative Western self.

C. Satire and Corruption:

- Writers like **Aravind Adiga** use sharp satire to link consumer wealth directly to corruption, asserting that in the new India, one cannot participate in the globalized wealth stream without engaging in illegal or immoral acts. The pursuit of the 'shining life' of consumerism is shown to necessitate moral darkness.

IV. GLOBALIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF DISRUPTION AND MOBILITY

Globalization is presented not as a seamless integration but as a series of disruptions affecting labor, geography, and social hierarchy.

A. The Bifurcation of India: The Light and the Darkness

- Adiga's *The White Tiger* provides the most stark structural metaphor: **The Darkness** (poor, rural, pre-modern India) and **The Light** (affluent, urban, globalized India). Globalization ensures that the Light thrives only by exploiting the Darkness, creating a deeper, more entrenched class divide than before.
- The novel's protagonist, Balram Halwai, must commit murder to transition from the feudal structure of the Darkness to the globalized capitalism of the Light, suggesting that the system is closed to ethical entry.

B. Transnationalism, Migration, and Alienation

- Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* explores how globalization affects the periphery and the diaspora. The judge's alienated life, the cook's son's failed attempt to emigrate illegally to the US, and the ensuing ethnic/political unrest in Kalimpong all point to the uneven, fragmenting effects of global economic forces.
- The desire for a better life abroad is framed as an economic necessity, creating a constant sense of rootlessness and unbelonging among those who leave and those who are left behind.

C. The Erosion of Traditional Economies

- Novels sometimes portray the ruin of local, agrarian, or small-scale industries due to the influx of cheap foreign goods or the expansion of corporate agricultural practices, highlighting the human cost of global market entry.

V. NEOCOLONIAL ECHOES: THE PERSISTENCE OF POWER AND CONTROL

The central critique of post-1991 fiction is that globalization merely rebranded colonial structures.

A. Economic Subservience and Corporate Impunity

- The true power in the new India rests not with the government, but with global capital and MNCs. The economic relationship is fundamentally unequal, with India often positioned as a provider of cheap labor or a dumping ground for unethical industrial practices.
- **Case Study: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*** (fictionalizing the Bhopal tragedy) directly confronts the neocolonial lack of corporate accountability, where a foreign company can inflict devastating damage and evade justice, showcasing the legal and political impotence of the postcolonial state against global finance.

B. The Internalization of Supremacy

- The elite Indian characters often display a deep contempt for their less privileged countrymen, mimicking the colonial attitude of superiority. The neocolonial structure is maintained not by foreigners, but by the internalized classism of the Indian ruling elite (the aforementioned comprador class).

C. English as a Neocolonial Gatekeeper

- Despite decades of independence, proficiency in English remains the primary currency for accessing global wealth, high-paying jobs, and upward mobility. Novels implicitly critique this, showing that the linguistic divide functions as an artificial barrier, ensuring only a small fraction of the population can fully participate in the globalized economy—a lingering colonial legacy.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE LITERARY DIAGNOSIS

Post-1991 Indian English Fiction serves as an essential archive and critique of India's economic metamorphosis. It reveals that the promises of globalization—equality, wealth, and modernity—are often illusory, masking deeper structural inequalities and a renewed form of neocolonial dependence facilitated by consumerist ideology.

- **Synthesis:** The fiction successfully links consumerism (the cultural effect) to globalization (the economic driver) and grounds both within the persisting framework of neocolonialism (the power structure).



- **Future Directions:** Future literary scholarship could explore how these themes continue to evolve with the rise of digital consumerism, social media, and the expansion of the "gig economy" in contemporary IEF.

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