



CASE STUDY ARTICLE

Section: *Literary Studies*

Published by Scientific-Board
LLC in the Research Journal in
Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education (RJTLLE). Volume
2, Issue 3, 2026.

ISSN: 3067-6290 (Online)
3068-8450 (Print)

Article Details

Received: 25 April 2026

Revised: 01 May 2026

Accepted: 17 June 2026

Published: 07 July 2026



Conflict of Interest: The author/s
declared no conflict of interest.



How to Cite:

Paul, M. (2026). Dark cities and toxic
growth: Environmental politics in
The White Tiger. *Research Journal
in Translation, Literature, Linguistics,
and Education*, 2(3), 93-102. [https://
doi.org/10.64120/xj6nvp32](https://doi.org/10.64120/xj6nvp32)

Dark cities and toxic growth: Environmental politics in *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Exhaustion and unthinkable destruction of the natural world resulted from the misuse and contamination of natural resources, which were fuelled by exponential industrial growth and a materialistic attitude toward global dominance. Ecological devastation, biodiversity loss, and climate change as a result of increased industrialization are no longer hypothetical issues in the current global environment (Beck 2008). Whether understood through the frameworks of the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene, there are various planetary threats affecting not only a particular geographical region, but the whole world, endangering both human and non-human lives. In addition, it has been critically observed that human day-to-day life activities toward the environment have a direct and extensive negative impact on the health of the planet, which depends on the lushness of its surrounding ecosystems and the various species that inhabit them. Here comes a dire need to protect our environment through sustainable development, which certainly refers to a better path of establishing a fruitful and symbiotic relationship amongst living, non-living and the natural world. Ecological disasters are manmade disasters such as different nuclear wars, air pollution, water pollution, population explosion, as well as depletion of valuable natural resources. Writers like Aravind Adiga has performed a significant role in arousing environmental and ecocritical concerns through his literary creation. The human association with the green nature is the central aspect of ecocriticism; however, the political aspects towards ecocriticism should be addressed with critical analysis through which the role of government and political perspective will be explored. This research paper will explore the political ecocritical perspective of *The White Tiger*.

Keywords: ecocriticism, environment, ecological disaster, politics,
political ecocriticism



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1. Introduction

Growing awareness of the planetary problem has led to a huge increase in scientific, artistic, and literary discourses that aim to depict events like ecological disasters, global warming, and the climate catastrophe that defy (conventional) representation. In these efforts, the concept of the Anthropocene is very important. As Timothy Clark asserts in *Ecocriticism on Edge*, it “names a newly recognized context that entails a chastening recognition of the limits of cultural representation as a force of change in human affairs, as compared to the numerous economic, meteorological, geographical and microbiological factors and population dynamics, as well as scale effects, such as the law of numbers, that arise from trying to think on a planetary scale” (2015: 21). It is time to think beyond anthropocentric attitude so that we can prevent our nature from getting polluted. While the headlines of newspapers talk about oil spills, deforestation, global warming, cloud bursting, toxic waste, acid rain, destruction of top soil, famine, droughts, floods, hurricanes, cyclones, and other disasters, it is clear that the outside literary world is limited in its hot topics, such as class, gender, and race, but it ignores and never suspects that the earth’s life system is in a critical situation. Without a doubt, one of the most important topics in the Western world in recent years has been the environment or ecology. In the scientific and social sciences, ecological challenges are particularly significant. Men with literary, social, and political obligations have an obligation to address pressing ecological issues and provide innovative, workable answers.

Safeguarding our Mother Nature should be one of the major concerns of humankind, as we are living in a threatened environment which is unprecedentedly contaminated by us to make our benefits in terms of various pollutions that pose a direct impact on nature. The crying need of the hour is to build a future that establishes an equilibrium between man and his surroundings. Man, for centuries had been playing the role of the master of all that he surveyed. He has believed in the existence of nature for the purpose of his sole utilisation. Therefore, he endeavoured upon its exploitation. The modern man is facing ecological disasters. Within this framework, eco-criticism emerges as a literary theory in the 21st century. “*A study of the relationship between literature and the environment conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalists’ praxis*” (Buell-p-430) is the definition of eco-criticism given in the book *The Environmental Imagination*. The relationship between humans and nature, particularly with regard to the physical environment, is the subject of ecocriticism in literature. It focuses on the green problems that the modern world is dealing with. “*The modern ecological consciousness has a feeling that the balance between humans and the natural world must be maintained. A perfect ecology is one in which plants, animals, birds and human beings live in such harmony that none dominates or destroys the other*” (Frederick p-147).

Environmental deterioration is a direct result of human activity. Global learning is facilitated by these activities, and people must consider environmental factors and their balance. It is time for us to unite and speak out against environmental injustice. The environment is essential to human survival. It’s time to embrace a lifestyle that is both ecologically and socially responsible. Ecocriticism holds that literature has the power to change society. In her book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmark in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty provides the following definition of the term:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies (xviii).

In his Man Booker Prize-winner *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga lashes out at the hollowness of India’s economic rise by revealing the darker side of its vaunted growth, and the socio-political deception that it brings with it (Choudhury, 2015). This paper will scrutinise how Adiga uses political ecocriticism to uncover the vicious entanglement of catastrophic urbanisation, environmental destruction and widening

socio-economic disparities defining modern India (Doshi, 2018). In particular, the narrative lucidly describes obscene inequities and environmental destruction visited upon fringe communities (Scandes, 2011) directly resulting from the relentless unchecked growth of capitalism and a culture of endemic bribery. As a result the novel is more than simply a social critique but also an ecocritic, understanding how the physical environment reflects the moral rot of a society contending with uneven progress (Baral, 2024).

2. Literature Review

In this section, I examine some of the existing scholarly dialogue surrounding *The White Tiger* and the different critical perspectives it has been interpreted through—including postcolonialism and sociology—its ideas of class and corruption, and the legacy of economic liberalization. While some academic works partially recognize the textual treatment of environmental problems, a full political ecocritical examination is yet to be initiated, focusing on how the urban degradation portrayed in the novel is, in fact, a direct result of an aggressive (economic) system (Walther 2014). This essay seeks to amend that oversight by reading Adiga's representation of the urban environment as an extension of the natural environment, characterized by ecological destruction and social inequality, contending that the material environment is not passive but an active antagonist in the novel's critique of contemporary Indian development. The second section examines how Adiga uses the decay of urban space as a metonym for moral degeneration and social schism under a neoliberal economy (Baral, 2021). This provides a way to analyze how the novel weaves together human exploitation and environmental exploitation in a cycle in which the destruction of the one prefigures the downfall of the other. What's more, this review will also cover how Adiga's story reflects some of the broader ecocritical concerns with anthropocentric attitudes inscribed in developmentalist paradigms and how this attitude generally results in ecological destruction and social injustice (Pancholi & Mishra, 2021). In line with Adiga's criticism of the serious societal and ecological risks posed by such development, literary works like Musa Ismail's *Novel Pudu's Cries* have also emphasized how unbridled capitalism leads to environmental harm and socioeconomic inequality (Hayuningtyas & Wiyatmi, 2022). Ecocriticism's central principle of examining the relationship between humans and nature in literary contexts is consistent with this viewpoint, which sees the environment as an active participant rather than a passive setting (Tajane, 2024). This method actively examines how political and economic systems influence environmental outcomes and are mirrored in the urban decay portrayed in the story, going beyond merely recognizing environmental themes.

3. Methodology

This study analyzes *The White Tiger* using a political ecocritical methodology, emphasizing how the book depicts the relationships between the environment, economy, and power. This framework enables a nuanced examination of how environmental degradation in the novel is a systemic result of political and economic policies that put profit and development ahead of ecological sustainability and social equity, rather than just the result of individual actions. This methodology reveals the unequal distribution of environmental burdens and benefits in a rapidly globalizing India by analyzing the lived experiences of characters such as the protagonist Balram Halwai. It does this by highlighting the ways in which urban decay, pollution, and resource depletion are inextricably linked to the socio-economic vulnerabilities of the urban poor. This method is in line with ecocritical principles, which look at the interdependence of human and non-human entities, and views the environment as an active agent that is influenced by and influences human socio-political structures rather than as a passive backdrop (Iheka, 2017). It further investigates how the novel's portrayal of physical decay, such as the polluted rivers and garbage-strewn streets, symbolizes the moral and ethical decay of a society driven by unchecked ambition and corruption, making a powerful statement about the true cost of "progress." This framework also enables an examination of how Adiga's depiction of the urban environment functions allegorically,

mirroring the moral corruption and societal fragmentation prevalent in neoliberal India. Insights from postcolonial ecocriticism will also be incorporated into this analytical framework, which recognizes how colonialism's legacies and historical power dynamics continue to influence environmental policies and urban development in modern-day India, thereby facilitating the ongoing exploitation of natural resources and human labor (Dewi, 2017) (Nayak et al., 2023). This interdisciplinary approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of how environmental issues are deeply embedded within broader social, economic, and political contexts, offering a critical perspective on the detrimental effects of unregulated urbanization on both human and ecological well-being. An examination of how the novel's allegorical use of urban blight functions as a powerful critique of developmental models that externalize environmental and social costs onto the marginalized is also made possible by this methodology (Sahay, 2006). This study aims to contribute to the evolving discourse on urban ecocriticism by offering a nuanced reading of Adiga's narrative that foregrounds the socio-environmental injustices embedded within the fabric of modern Indian cities. The approach will also take into account how literature can increase ecological consciousness and promote a better comprehension of the relationship between human behavior and environmental effects (Tajane, 2024). This is in line with ecocriticism's overarching goal of shedding light on the various facets of people's interactions with their surroundings, including natural phenomena and a variety of life forms (Dhar, 2020). In this context, the novel's depiction of rapid urbanization and its environmental fallout provides a fertile ground for exploring the complex interplay between human ambition, societal structures, and ecological degradation. Specifically, this analysis will engage with how the novel critiques the "toxic growth" paradigm, wherein rapid economic expansion disproportionately burdens the environment and marginalized communities, leading to visible urban decay as a manifestation of systemic injustices. The environmental and ecological effects of urbanization in India, where growing cities increase in both number and density, frequently at the expense of ecological health, are directly correlated with this toxic growth (Nagendra et al., 2013).

By revealing the socio-political deceit that lies beneath India's much-lauded development, Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* exposes the superficiality of the country's economic rise (Choudhury, 2015). This essay will examine Adiga's use of political ecocriticism to expose the pernicious connection between India's current socioeconomic divide, environmental deterioration, and fast urbanization (Doshi, 2018). In particular, the story eloquently illustrates how unbridled capitalist growth and a widespread culture of corruption directly result in the systemic injustices and environmental harm inflicted upon marginalized communities (Schotland, 2011). Thus, the book goes beyond simple social criticism to explore how the physical world reflects the moral decline of a society struggling with unequal development (Baral, 2024). Writers like Aravind Adiga has performed a significant role in arousing environmental and ecocritical concerns through his literary creation. Even though nature is the main focus of all ecocritical works, not all nature writings fall under this category. Ecocritical literature is based on the human connection to the environment and physical world. Ecocriticism examines the environment from interdisciplinary perspectives in addition to studying literature from an ecological standpoint. It discusses the destruction of the physical environment, the premature extinction of natural species, and the effects of urbanisation and industrialisation. It alerts people to environmental issues such pollution, deforestation, natural degradation, and the environmental catastrophe. It also makes recommendations for potential fixes for significant ecological problems of the modern era.

4. Discussion

In my research, Aravind Adiga's *White Tiger* is analysed as sharp critique of modern India's class system, economic inequality and disparity, moral decay and hypocrisy. However, by applying the concept of political ecocriticism, we can deepen our understanding of how the novel's first chapter reflects the irreparable environmental degradation and how the existing political power endorses that degradation to gain their profit by means of exploitation of the underprivileged. It shows how power and politics

are intimately connected. Political ecocriticism explores the intersections of environmental issues with systems of oppression, exposing how ecological exploitation reflects and reinforces inequalities based on class, caste, gender, and global capitalism. While *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is not primarily an environmental novel, it does subtly depict environmental degradation and ecological injustice as part of the broader critique of inequality and exploitation in modern capitalist India. The novel's environmental catastrophes are neither abrupt or catastrophic in the conventional sense; rather, they reflect the long, chronic degradation of ecosystems that disproportionately impacts the impoverished, mirroring Rob Nixon's theory of slow violence. This vivid image of the polluted Ganga River critiques the failure of the state and religious hypocrisy. The sacred river, central to Indian spiritual and cultural life, has been turned into a toxic dump, reflecting the disconnect between tradition and modern industrial practices. The pollution is a symbol of environmental collapse, especially in regions inhabited by the poor, who must drink, bathe, and work in this contaminated water.

Nature of Problems

- How does the writer present issues of ecological disaster or crises in a specific country where there is a sharp distinction between rich and poor?
- Incorporation of new concepts like Political Ecology, Environmental literacy, Ecological Crisis, Environmental Injustice, Eco-anxiety, etc.

White Tiger, novel by Aravind Adiga, explores impact of environmental degradation on the characters and society as a whole. Among the environmental problems portrayed throughout the book are the top class's profit-driven attitude towards land degradation, the expansion of cities due to capitalism, rising air pollution, the depletion of water supplies, and extreme poverty. In *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, several instances and themes can be interpreted as examples of environmental injustice. While the novel primarily focuses on broader societal and economic inequalities, some moments reflect the concept of environmental injustice.

Through an ecocritical lens, we can examine the portrayal of the environment and its relationship to power and oppression in the novel. In *White Tiger*, degradation of the natural environment is used as a metaphor for the decay of Indian society. The polluted air and water, the disappearing forests and wildlife, and the rampant industrialization all represent the corruption and moral decay that pervades the society in which Balram lives, "To my left, I saw the domes of the President's House-the place where all the important business of the country is done. When the air pollution is really bad, the building is completely blotted out from the road..." (P 134).

Important questions pertaining to fundamental and inventive movements in the Indian-English context have been handled by academics such as Adiga. The analysis of topics such as post-provincial migration, multi-cultural nativism, and the importance of social-political interaction is extremely significant and successful. Indian writers skilfully and deftly address and outline the realities surrounding these challenges. Through Balram's journey from a poor rural village to a successful entrepreneur in the city, we see how the environment shapes his worldview and his actions. As his involvement with the corrupt system deepens, he starts to view the environment not as a precious and finite ecosystem but as a resource to be used for personal benefit. The degradation of the environment also has a direct impact on the characters in the novel. For example, Balram's family in the village is forced to drink polluted water, which leads to illness and death. Similarly, the disappearance of forests and wildlife threatens the livelihoods of those who depend on them for survival.

Furthermore, the environmental degradation perpetuates inequalities and reinforces power structures. Those in positions of power are able to exploit the environment for their own gain, while those who are marginalized and oppressed suffer the consequences. The novel depicts the exploitation of rural communities for the benefit of urban development. Balram Halwai, the protagonist, comes from

a rural background and is exposed to the stark contrast between the underdeveloped villages and the rapidly growing urban centres. The novel touches on the issue of pollution and its impacts on the health and well-being of different social groups. In the city of Delhi, where Balram works, pollution levels are extremely high, leading to health problems for the poor residents who cannot afford medicines, proper protection or healthcare.

“Rush hour in Delhi. Cars, scooters, motorbikes, auto rickshaws, black taxis, jostling for space on the road. The pollution is so bad that the men on the motorbikes and scooters have a handkerchief wrapped around their faces—each time you stop at a red light, you see a row of men with black glasses and masks on their faces” (P 133). As the novel portrays the rapid urbanization of Indian cities, it also hints at the displacement of poorer communities to make way for new development, “I could see multitudes of small, then grimy people squatting, waiting for a bus to take them somewhere or with nowhere to go and about to unfurl a mattress and sleep right there. These poor bastards had come from Darkness to Delhi to find some light—but they were still in the darkness. Hundreds of them, there seemed to be, on either side of the traffic” (P 158). While *The White Tiger* does not extensively explore environmental injustice, it does provide glimpses into how environmental disparities can intersect with broader economic and social inequalities.

In this narrative, political ecology is crucial. An interdisciplinary field called “Political Ecology” studies how the economy and politics affect how society and the environment interact. It exposes and scrutinizes how power dynamics, socio-economic structures, political perspectives shape environmental practices and environmental justice. Aravind Adiga intertwines themes of environmental degradation, industrial pollution, and human suffering, offering a poignant narrative that resonates with principles related to political ecology. Political ecology looks at how the environment interacts with political, economic, and social elements and tries to offer both criticism and alternatives. The discipline has a normative awareness that there are probably better, less exploitative, less coercive, and more sustainable ways to do things, according to Robbins (2005).

These presumptions allow political ecology to be utilised for:

- Better environmental governance can be achieved by educating policymakers and organisations about the complexities of the environment and development.
- comprehending how communities make decisions regarding the environment in light of social norms, economic pressures, and political environments;
- Examining the ways in which unequal relations within and between societies impact the environment, particularly regarding government policy.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga illustrates this form of violence vividly in the rural village of Laxmangarh, where environmental degradation, poverty, and systemic exploitation quietly erode the lives of its inhabitants. While the novel doesn’t describe overt or immediate physical violence in Laxmangarh, it reveals how generations of villagers suffer under conditions that are structurally violent: polluted water, defunct infrastructure, inadequate healthcare, hunger, and denial of education. These slow-moving harms are politically maintained and environmentally embedded, making Laxmangarh a powerful example of environmental injustice and slow violence. The strong narrative power of literature is reflected through his writing. He has proved that literature is such a tool which can mirror the excruciating violence imposed on the marginalized class since time immemorial. In this context, it is very relevant to quote Rob Nixon, who has truly posed certain questions:

How can we turn long-term, slow-moving disasters, anonymous disasters that star no one, and attritional disasters that are of little interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world into images and narratives? This is a crucial strategic and representational question in a time when the media exalts the spectacular, and public policy is largely based on perceived immediate need. How can

the protracted emergencies of slow violence—whose aftermaths have led to some of the most pressing issues of our day—be transformed into tales dramatic enough to rouse public emotion and demand political action? (3)

Dhanbad is presented as a microcosm of eco-political violence. It is a city built on environmental plunder and sustained by political corruption, class domination, and ecological disregard. The exploitation of coal, the silencing of the poor, and the systemic inequality all contribute to a landscape of slow violence, where both the earth and its people are mined and discarded. The working class and poor in Dhanbad live near these polluted spaces, while the rich live in protected homes with access to clean water, transport, and services. This is a case of environmental injustice, a key concern of political ecocriticism. The mines also symbolize extractive capitalism: land is stripped, and workers are exhausted and replaced, much like the environmental landscape itself. From a political ecocritical perspective, Dhanbad represents a sacrificial zone, where the land and the labor of the poor are exploited to fuel national development. The so-called elite class never compromise their way of living to save the planet; no matter how polluted the earth becomes, the insatiable greed of the industrialist will keep on exploiting nature to produce profit-driven materials by means of exploitation of labour and nature.

The villagers lack access to clean water and safe sanitation, which leads to chronic illness and premature death. But because these deaths occur slowly, invisibly, and without spectacle, they are ignored—both by government and by upper classes who are supported by the government. This is slow violence in its purest form: life is drained quietly over time. The four landlords—Stork, Raven, Wild Boar, Rand, Buffalo—own most of land and demand rent and taxes from impoverished farmers, despite contributing nothing to the village's development. The arrival of the Stork is not just a narrative development, rather, it embodies a picture that reveals the ecopolitical structure of domination in rural India. The Stork is more than a greedy landlord—he represents ecological control as his political influence depicts the monopoly over the environment:

He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village. His brother was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. (P24-25).

They extract wealth without reinvestment, leaving the land and the people depleted and stagnant. Balram describes how elections are rigged, and the villagers are manipulated into voting for corrupt leaders who never return. Without political voice, the people have no access to resources or development. Political ecocriticism argues that powerlessness leads to environmental suffering, as those without agency cannot demand clean air, healthcare, education, or safe housing. In Laxmangarh, the environment becomes a weapon, reinforcing caste and class hierarchies, while its destruction occurs too slowly and locally to alarm the national consciousness. Balram reflects on how the villagers have accepted their fate as permanent. “They remain animals in a coop,” he says, referring to the metaphorical “Rooster Coop” that keeps the poor obedient despite their suffering. Using Rob Nixon's framework, we see that Laxmangarh is not just a poor village—it is a silent battlefield, where lives are shortened not by war or disaster, but by generations of neglect, pollution, and political abandonment. The power of Adiga's narrative lies in making this slow violence visible.

5. Conclusion

In an overtly populated country like India, environmental issues should be addressed with utmost concern as disaster, whether natural or man-made, always disrupts social, political, economic and cultural aspects. At the same time, environment is politically affected in terms of its usage it. For the sake of building skyscrapers, high-rises, we are cutting off big trees; for the sake of tourism, we are destroying hills and mountains, chopping down forests, killing wild creatures and as a result, the human race is

destroying itself through the adoption of a lifestyle which is not sustainable. The money generated by such aforementioned issues is enjoyed by the elite and rich class of the society; on the other hand, the doers and makers of such things are suffering as means to everything.

A nation's overall development and its level of environmental security are closely intertwined. Poverty and environmental degradation coexist in a developing country like India. For daily survival, people desperately require resources, fertile land, and clean water. The land on which the people reside is intertwined with their way of life and culture. The economics, culture, and daily lives of the populace are all adversely impacted when that land is destroyed or contaminated. Thus, there is a need for a paradigm shift from the anthropocentric to the ecocentric set of values. The writer here has proposed inculcation of deep ecological vision and mass awareness about environmental justice issues as a solution to the ongoing ecological crisis, which is politically intensified. Thus, the research arrives at the conclusion that there is a crying need to preserve nature as humans are primary members of the natural world and government, as one of the driving forces of a nation, should maintain an equilibrium between endorsing capitalistic profit and keeping a sustainable nature altogether.

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