



# Shadows of Progress

## *Hydrofeminism and Environmental Injustice in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger*

*Golam Rabbani, Metropolitan University, Bangladesh*

### **Abstract**

This essay explores environmental injustice in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) through the lens of hydrofeminism, a framework developed by Astrida Neimanis that connects water politics to feminist ethics and ecological critique. While Adiga's novel is well-known for its criticism on class and corruption in modern India, it also highlights how ecological degradation intensifies gender-based inequalities under urbanization, caste oppression, and capitalist development. However, focusing on the rivers: Ganga and Yamuna, the polluted city and rural spaces, and the silent suffering of female characters like Balram's mother, Kusum, and Pinky Madam, this paper argues how water becomes a medium for expressing structural inequality. Additionally, by situating this analysis within a pedagogical framework, it offers strategies for teaching climate justice and gender sensitivity through literature.

### **Keywords**

hydrofeminism, environmental degradation, feminist ecology, water justice, climate literature

## Introduction

In the age of rapid climate change, literature has become a vital medium for reflecting on and responding to ecological challenges. Climate literature—also known as “cli-fi,” a term defined by Adam Trexler (2015) and further developed by Lykke Guanio-Uluru (2019)—urges us to examine how environmental destruction is entangled with politics, economics, and social inequality. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), though it is read as a critique of India’s class system, also contains powerful insights into the environmental costs of modernization. One early scene of the novel depicts Balram, the male protagonist of the novel, observing that, “The river Ganga... black and brackish with industrial sewage; the banks were lined with feces; the water was full of chemicals” (Adiga, 2008, p. 15). This vivid image of sacred waters reduced to sludge embodies the ecological degradation shaping the novel’s ethical landscape. This paper explores how water—particularly the Ganga and Yamuna rivers—symbolizes structural inequality in *The White Tiger*. By examining the contrast between polluted urban spaces and neglected rural areas, and by highlighting the silent suffering of female characters such as Balram’s mother, Kusum, and Pinky Madam, it argues that water functions as a powerful medium for exposing social and gender-based injustices.

To interpret such environmental violence, this essay unfolds Astrida Neimanis’ (2017) concept of hydrofeminism, which views all beings as “bodies of water”, emphasizing the shared vulnerability and interdependence of human and non-human life through water systems. It criticizes patriarchal and capitalist structures that commodify nature while disproportionately burdening women, particularly in marginalized communities. Hydrofeminism challenges us to recognize water not just as a natural resource but as a relational, political, and ethical force—shaping who gets to live, labor, and lead in an ecologically unequal world. As Neimanis (2017) explains, “hydrofeminism reveals how bodies are always more than human, more than individual, and more than sovereign” (p. 61), inviting readers to see gendered and environmental oppression as intertwined. Thus, in highlighting hydrofeminism, this essay exhibits how water and gender intersect with caste, corruption, and capitalism in the novel, helping educators and students approach climate literacy through stories grounded in local and global justice (Chakrabarty, 2009).

## Water, Class, and Capitalism

In this novel, water transcends its literal presence to become a vehicle for representing entrenched class divisions. Balram's village, located in the "Darkness," is a place where poor people suffer from chronic scarcity and contamination because they must rely on unsafe sources. He describes how villagers "fetch water from the pond every morning, even when it's dry and full of green scum" (Adiga, 2008, pp. 24-26). The portrayal of a filthy, unreliable, and potentially deadly pond underscores how this scarcity becomes a visible form of environmental degradation. Balram also frequently contrasts rural deprivation with the luxury of urban centers. His amazement at his employer's access to bottled water reinforces how fluid resources reflect class hierarchies: "They even brushed their teeth with mineral water" (p. 78). This highlights water as both a literal and symbolic boundary between classes—dirty rivers as markers of marginality, and bottled purity as a symbol of control. The division mirrors Vandana Shiva's (2002) argument that the neoliberal model of privatization in India has transformed a basic necessity into a corporate product, thereby deepening ecological injustice (p. 42). In hydrofeminist terms, those who labor to sustain life—often rural women—are excluded from the very systems that govern access. Kusum, for instance, is one of these unseen household managers who, despite bearing the burden of securing and managing daily supply, has no voice in village or household decisions. Her labor is taken for granted, and she remains excluded from formal discussions or infrastructural planning that determines availability of safe sources.

Balram's transformation from a poor villager to a wealthy entrepreneur is also an environmental journey—from polluted communal rivers to filtered dispensers in private offices. His migration is not just socioeconomic but ecological. Neimanis (2017) reminds us that water flows through every body and institution, but not all bodies have equal access or control (p. 2). Balram's narrative shows the disparity as he rises, he becomes more detached from the polluted environments of his past. Thus, Adiga uses water to map India's class structure, making visible the everyday violence of inequality. Water, a basic necessity, becomes a litmus test of privilege—who drinks safely and who gets sick, who controls the taps and who bends to fill buckets.

Moreover, the novel suggests that even the wealthy cannot escape moral contamination. Balram reflects, "There's so much smog in the air that I couldn't see the road... But I could see the buildings" (Adiga, 2008, p. 123), highlighting the contradiction of shining skyscrapers emerging from toxic air. Delhi and Bangalore—the cities of India's economic prosperity—are not spaces of opportunity but ecological catastrophes disguised by neoliberal aspirations. As Rob Nixon (2011) argues, such growth depends on "unseen casualties"—the dispossessed, the displaced, and the

diseased. Adiga dismantles the myth of urban progress by exposing how elite comfort rests on environmental decay.

According to this perspective, Delhi and Bangalore emerge not as centers of hope but as dystopias in disguise. Adiga reveals that urbanization under neoliberal capitalism is less a cure for rural suffering and more a reorganization of exploitation—where environmental ruin is rebranded as economic success.

## **Rivers and Riverbanks as Risky Gendered Landscapes**

The Yamuna River, like the Ganga, is portrayed as a space of environmental devastation and lost sanctity. Balram describes Delhi's rivers as "black... not water, but thick, black sewage" (Adiga, 2008, p. 112), marking a stark transformation from spiritual purity to chemical ruin. This symbolic death signifies not only ecological neglect but also a spiritual and cultural disconnection—a severing of communal bonds once sustained by clean water. Riverbanks, once spaces for purification, now evoke toxicity, disease, and danger. From a hydrofeminist perspective, these polluted spaces become risky gendered landscapes, as women—primarily responsible for securing household water and maintaining hygiene—must navigate hazardous environments daily. Although centered on Balram's male perspective, the novel reveals that women, especially those in slums or migrant settlements, bear the burdens of sanitation and caregiving without safe resources. They undertake the arduous tasks of fetching water from distant pumps and boiling contaminated supplies, exposing them to physical danger, health risks, and social vulnerability.

Balram's grandmother, Kusum, is one such figure whose survival is entangled with ecological hardship. Despite holding authority within the household, she performs unpaid environmental labor—rising early to collect water from unreliable sources that often cause illness: "Every morning she went to fetch water before the sun was up... her hands red from the cold, her feet cracked" (Adiga, 2008, pp. 25-28). This image of physical deterioration underscores how rural women disproportionately shoulder the effects of scarcity, aligning with Vandana Shiva's (2002) view that women are frontline victims of privatization and pollution. Yet these injustices stem not from natural disasters but from systemic inequality, corruption, and rural neglect.

While Pinky Madam, Balram's employer's wife, is not directly affected by environmental degradation, her psychological unraveling after a hit-and-run incident reveals the emotional toll of living within corrupt systems: "She ran over a child and didn't say a word. Just drove on" (Adiga, 2008, p. 167). Her silent withdrawal reflects a rupture in moral consciousness, echoing Neelam Srivastava's (2010) claim that global capitalism fragments identity (p. 45). Sara Ahmed's (2014) concept of the "willful

woman” helps interpret Pinky’s retreat as a form of resistance to patriarchal norms (p. 59). Though not a traditional environmental subject, her character illustrates how systemic violence—ecological, emotional, or social—also affects the privileged, reinforcing Sharae Deckard’s (2015) claim that elite detachment is an illusion (p. 211).

Characters like Kusum, with her cracked hands and predawn labor, embodies these gendered risks (Adiga, 2008, pp. 25-28). Thus, even without direct narrative emphasis, the novel’s backdrop affirms that ecological degradation exacerbates gendered vulnerability in subtle but pervasive ways.

In this novel, women—though fewer in number—illuminate the gendered dimensions of environmental injustice. Their experiences reveal how ecological decline disproportionately affects women, especially in rural and marginalized areas of India. Balram’s mother, though unnamed and briefly mentioned, serves as a powerful symbol of gendered suffering. Her death is linked to contaminated water: “My mother’s body was laid out on the banks of the river... priests poured water over her head” (Adiga, 2008, p. 30). The cruel irony of this ritual purification—performed with polluted river water—underscores the dissonance between spiritual tradition and ecological reality. Her death exemplifies what Neimanis (2017) calls a “leaky body”—one that absorbs systemic neglect and whose suffering remains largely invisible. In hydrofeminist terms, polluted water does not merely flow around the body; it infiltrates and transforms it, rendering women’s bodies literal sites of environmental violence. Balram’s mother thus represents how systemic environmental neglect penetrates bodily boundaries, creating embodied forms of ecological injustice that often remain unnoticed.

## Teaching *The White Tiger* through Hydrofeminism

Teaching *The White Tiger* through a hydrofeminist framework provides a meaningful opportunity to connect literature with contemporary ecological and gender justice concerns. This approach encourages students to interrogate not only the novel’s social inequalities but also its environmental undercurrents, especially those tied to water scarcity, pollution, and the gendered burden of ecological neglect.

By applying Astrida Neimanis’s concept of hydrofeminism in the classroom, educators can guide students to view water not as a neutral resource but as an ethical and political agent—shaping who has access, who labors, and who suffers. For instance, a class discussion can begin with the polluted imagery of the Ganga and Yamuna rivers and ask students: “Who in the novel is responsible for fetching water? Who controls it? Who suffers the consequences of its contamination?” This line of inquiry brings forth the gendered, caste-based, and class-specific dimensions of water justice.

To foster critical thinking and empathy, students might undertake creative exercises such as writing interior monologues from the perspective of Kusum or Balram's mother, imagining their daily routines, frustrations, and resilience in a polluted and patriarchal environment. Another activity could include comparative media analysis, where students examine real-life water crises in India (e.g., Yamuna pollution, Delhi water shortages) alongside the novel's depictions. These interdisciplinary practices bring literature into dialogue with environmental studies, sociology, and gender theory.

Role-playing debates—such as one between government officials, environmental activists, and rural women—can help students simulate real-world power dynamics over water rights and understand the unequal burdens placed on marginalized communities. Teachers may also ask students to identify metaphors of water in the text and relate them to hydrofeminist ideas like “leaky bodies” and “watery ethics,” promoting deeper literary analysis.

Ultimately, *The White Tiger* becomes more than a critique of ambition and corruption—it evolves into a tool for developing what Paulo Freire (1970) terms critical consciousness. Through hydrofeminist pedagogy, students not only interpret texts but also begin to see their connections to broader struggles for environmental and social equity. In this way, literature becomes an act of activism—enabling learners to imagine more inclusive, sustainable futures where clean water and human dignity are rights, not luxuries.

## Conclusion

Although *The White Tiger* is not typically categorized as climate fiction, it offers profound insights into the intersections of environmental degradation, urban decay, and systemic inequality. Balram's journey—from a village plagued by toxic rivers to a city where clean water is a luxury commodity—reveals that so-called “progress” often rests on the suffering of the poor and the invisible labor of women. His rise to success is built on the backs of those left voiceless. Adiga's vivid depiction of urban spaces, shrouded in smog and sewage, embodies what Rob Nixon (2011) describes as “slow violence”—the gradual, largely invisible harm inflicted by environmental neglect. By bringing these issues into the classroom, educators can help students move beyond literary analysis to develop a critical consciousness about real-world environmental and social justice challenges. Ultimately, *The White Tiger* invites readers to imagine a future where sustainability and justice are inseparable—a world where clean air, safe water, and human dignity are rights shared by all, not privileges reserved for a few.

## References

- Adiga, A. (2008). *The White Tiger*. Free Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *Willful Subjects*. Duke University Press.
- Chakrabarty, D. (2009). The climate of history: Four theses. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), pp. 197–222.
- Deckard, S. (2015). *Paradise discourse, imperialism, and globalization: Exploiting Eden*. Routledge.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Herder and Herder.
- Guanio-Uluru, L. (2019). Climate fiction in Nordic landscapes. *Barnelitterært forskningstidsskrift*, (1), pp. 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2000-7493-2019-01-05>.
- Neimanis, A. (2017). *Bodies of water: Posthuman feminist phenomenology*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.
- Shiva, V. (2002). *Water wars: Privatization, pollution, and profit*. South End Press.
- Srivastava, N. (2010). *Indian writing in English and the global literary marketplace*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Trexler, A. (2015). *Anthropocene fictions: The novel in a time of climate change*. University of Virginia Press.