

Claiming the Right to Speak: Youth Agency and Student Voice in the Fiction of Upamanyu Chatterjee and Aravind Adiga

Mallavalli. Thambi Rani¹

Research scholar, Department of EOFL, Vigan's Institute of Science, Technology
& Research, Vadlamudi AP, mallavallithambiramesh@gmail.com

Shah Al Mamun Sarkar²

Assistant Professor, Department of EOFL, Vigan's Institute of Science, Technology
& Research, Vadlamudi AP, shahalmamunsarkar@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper critically analyses how student voice and youth-led agency are expressed in a few works by well-known Indian English novelists Aravind Adiga and Upamanyu Chatterjee, who are renowned for their sharp depictions of modern Indian society. This study examines how young protagonists negotiate institutional structures, including elite educational systems, bureaucracies, and socio-economic hierarchies, in order to assert their individuality, moral agency, and socio-political consciousness. It does this by drawing on stories like *English, August: An Indian Story*, *Weight Loss*, *The White Tiger*, and *Selection Day*. The novels reveal the conflicts between imposed identities and the desire for self-written futures through the characters of Agastya Sen, Balram Halwai, and Manju Kumar. These main characters act as fictionalized depictions of young people in the real world who challenge social norms, oppose systemic control, and doubt ingrained values. Their experiences mirror the existential and psychological challenges of young people torn between their own goals and social expectations. This paper makes the case that Chatterjee and Adiga portray young people as active change agents who are frequently imperfect, conflicted, and able to critique and reinvent themselves rather than as passive recipients of tradition. The texts emphasize how crucial it is to hear students' opinions and consider young people's viewpoints in literary and educational discussions. By doing this, they support the demand for increased student agency and involvement in institutional settings. By integrating literary analysis with the theme of learner autonomy, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how fiction can foster critical reflection on the socio-educational role of youth. It advocates for literature as a transformative space where young voices are not only heard but empowered to lead and reimagine the future.

Keywords: *socio-economic hierarchies, individuality, socio-political consciousness, ingrained values, young voices*

Identity, voice, and power are among the issues that are being critically examined in the modern Indian English novel. The topic of youth agency and student voice is central to these, especially in the writings of authors like Aravind Adiga and Upamanyu Chatterjee. These novelists are well known for their incisive portrayals of the conflicts that exist between the institutional, social, and political structures of contemporary India and the aspirations of the individual. Young protagonists' battles to establish their independence, defy established hierarchies, and forge a meaningful identity in the face of structural forces are frequently depicted in their fiction. In order to demonstrate how young people negotiate their "right to speak" in situations that frequently try to silence or discipline them, this paper places Chatterjee and Adiga within the larger conversation on youth identity. A term that has gained popularity in educational research, "student voice" emphasizes the significance of viewing students as active participants who are capable of critical reflection, decision-making, and social change rather than just as passive consumers of knowledge (Cook-Sather, 2006). Literarily speaking, this means stories that emphasize young people as critics, rebels, and reinventors. This viewpoint is supported by Chatterjee and Adiga's novels, which depict the internal and external struggles that young people encounter as they defy expectations and reinterpret what it means to be a part of a rapidly changing Indian society. Their writings demonstrate that raising one's voice is a profound declaration of socio-political consciousness as well as an act of self-expression.

One of the first postcolonial portrayals of a disillusioned young bureaucrat, Agastya Sen, whose estrangement from the Indian Administrative Service underscores the conflict between institutional authority and individual identity, can be found in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988). The book emphasizes how bureaucratic and elite educational systems frequently enforce conformity and disillusionment on young people instead of empowering them. The protagonist of Chatterjee's (2006) *Weight Loss* also questions the limited definitions of acceptable youth identity in Indian society by defying the moral and social expectations placed on him through his eccentricities and transgressions. Together, these texts show Chatterjee's ongoing interest in young protagonists who vacillate between obedience and disobedience, highlighting the inconsistencies of contemporary Indian institutions.

Aravind Adiga, on the other hand, frequently places his fiction in socioeconomic hierarchies, emphasizing the connections between ambition, class, and moral conflict. Balram Halwai, a self-taught entrepreneur whose voice rises in direct opposition to systemic oppression and entrenched inequality, is the subject of his Booker Prize-winning *The White Tiger* (2008). Adiga demonstrates through Balram how speaking—literally recounting his story—becomes a means of resistance and empowerment. Similarly, *Selection Day* (2016) uses the character of Manju Kumar, a young child torn between his own desire for individuality and his family's expectations, to examine the world of cricket and middle-class aspirations. Adiga emphasizes how young voices can both question current power structures and envision alternate futures by placing youth at the centre of stories about ambition, corruption, and disillusionment.

Their depictions of young people as conflicted, flawed, and profoundly human beings whose struggles mirror larger societal tensions rather than as idealized representations of nationalist hope are what bind Chatterjee and Adiga together. The voices of the main characters frequently struggle with consistency or coherence; they falter, hesitate, and contradict one another. However, their agency is located exactly in this imperfection. It becomes a form of existential and political significance to question, doubt, and resist. Youth culture theorists contend that young people's refusal to fit in should not be written off as simple rebellion but

rather as a necessary compromise with systems that aim to control their futures (Giroux, 2014).

This study also highlights the similarities between literature and educational discourse by examining these narratives from the perspective of asserting one's right to speak. Chatterjee and Adiga's novels highlight the importance of listening to young people in socio-political contexts, much as proponents of student voice argue for more inclusive pedagogical practices that prioritize learners' perspectives. Here, literature transforms into a platform for the repressed or marginalized voices of students and young people to be heard, allowing readers to critically consider the socio-educational role of youth. In this sense, Chatterjee and Adiga's books support a different cultural narrative about Indian youth that emphasizes the messy, ambiguous process of becoming, embraces contradiction, and opposes homogenization. Their main characters represent a generation that tries to define their own moral and intellectual boundaries while battling colonial legacies and neo-liberal influences. Thus, the "right to speak" is framed as a collective and political demand for recognition within institutions that frequently stifle youth autonomy, rather than just as a personal right.

While much scholarship on Indian English fiction has examined themes such as globalization, postcolonial identity, and class inequality (Chakravarty, 2013; Sharma, 2017), the ways in which young people in these novels' express student voice and exercise agency in opposition to institutional control have received comparatively less attention. While Adiga is primarily interpreted in terms of neoliberal critique and subaltern resistance, existing studies frequently approach Chatterjee's works through the prism of urban alienation or bureaucratic satire. This essay highlights how fiction adds to current discussions about student voice and educational empowerment by pointing out a gap in placing both authors within the framework of youth studies and learner autonomy. The study's methodology combines interdisciplinary viewpoints from postcolonial theory, sociology of literature, and youth studies with a close textual analysis of a few chosen novels: *English, August*, *Weight Loss*, *The White Tiger*, and *Selection Day*.

Negotiating Institutional Control: Bureaucracy, Education, and Class

The way young people negotiate strong institutions that define, control, and frequently stifle individuality is a major theme in Upamanyu Chatterjee and Aravind Adiga's fiction. Agastya Sen is portrayed in Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) as a young man torn between his Western education and the bureaucratic world of rural India. His alienation is captured in his inability to reconcile institutional expectations with his personal search for meaning: "*In the small town he was posted to, nothing seemed to connect with the world he had known, yet he was supposed to belong*" (Chatterjee, *English, August* 52). The paradox of an elite education that promises empowerment but frequently results in dislocation is reflected in Agastya's fractured identity. According to academics, Chatterjee employs satire to draw attention to the discrepancy between youth realities and institutional ideals (Chakravarty 87). It is possible to interpret Agastya's silence, marijuana use, and disengagement as a subliminal criticism of bureaucratic intransigence and the marginalization of young voices rather than as a sign of indifference.

Similarly, Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) dramatizes the struggles of Balram Halwai, who refuses to remain voiceless in the socio-economic hierarchies of India's "darkness." His narrative voice, framed as a letter to the Chinese Premier, becomes a radical assertion of agency: "*I am tomorrow. I am today's white tiger*" (Adiga, *The White Tiger* 276). Balram defies a system that expects him to stay invisible by sharing his story. Reminding readers of Spivak's query, his claim to speak subverts colonial legacies as well as class. "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 271). Balram demands to be heard, in contrast to the subaltern who

has been silenced, even if it means making morally dubious decisions like murder. Adiga's portrayal of a protagonist who is both a victim and a rebel, as well as an agent of neoliberal ambition, has been criticized for redefining youth autonomy (Sharma 62). Therefore, Chatterjee and Adiga both show how institutions class hierarchy in one instance, bureaucracy in another try to suppress young people and how the protagonists fight back by claiming their right to speak.

Youth Agency as Resistance and Reinvention

Beyond resistance, both writers emphasize how young people reimagine themselves in innovative and occasionally rebellious ways. A notable example can be found in Chatterjee's *Weight Loss* (2006). Through peculiar actions that others consider abnormal, its protagonist, Bhola, violates moral and social norms. He publicly questions accepted standards of discipline, conformity, and sexuality: "*He did not know what he wanted, but he knew he did not want what others told him to*" (Chatterjee, *Weight Loss* 113). Bhola's agency comes from his refusal to adopt societal norms of normalcy rather than from his conventional success. Such acts of defiance are acknowledged in youth studies as "counter-narratives" that enable marginalized people to rewrite their identities (Giroux 44). Bhola is used by Chatterjee to illustrate that the freedom to express oneself encompasses the freedom to reject homogenizing moral standards, live a messy life, and deviate from them. Manju Kumar, a young cricket player whose father projects his goals onto him, serves as a dramatic vehicle for the conflict between imposed identity and self-authorship in Adiga's *Selection Day* (2016). Manju acknowledges, "*Sometimes I feel I am only a reflection of what others see in me*" (Adiga, *Selection Day* 89).

This expression of alienation is consistent with what education theorists refer to as authoritarian pedagogies that silence student voice (Cook-Sather 372). Manju, however, progressively establishes his uniqueness by challenging not only his father's authority but also the dishonest system that turns young athletes into commodities. Though less vocal than Balram's, his resistance is just as important because it represents the conflicts middle-class youth face when balancing autonomy and ambition. According to scholars, Adiga's use of cricket as a metaphor for neoliberal ambition reveals the ways in which institutions both control and provide spaces for youth to rebel (Nair 215). Youth agency is portrayed by Chatterjee and Adiga as multifaceted through these characters, which are frequently contradictory, hesitant, and disruptive at times. However, as suggested by Deuchar (2009), young people express their right to speak through "contested and imperfect forms of agency" (33).

Literature, Student Voice, and Youth Studies

The importance of these narratives is further highlighted by placing them within larger theoretical discussions. The idea of student voice highlights the need to acknowledge students as critical participants in their education and knowledge producers (Fielding 307). Adiga's Manju and Chatterjee's Agastya illustrate what occurs when young people aren't given this kind of acknowledgment; they either struggle to regain their agency or withdraw into silence. Their ultimate declaration of individuality exemplifies what Fielding refers to as "radical collegiality," in which youth voices challenge established power structures (311).

Both writers emphasize the legacy of colonial and neo-liberal systems on youth identity from a postcolonial standpoint. Bhabha's concept of "hybridity," in which colonial legacies produce fractured identities, can be connected to Agastya's sense of alienation (Bhabha 112). By demonstrating that the subaltern not only has the ability to speak but also needs to insist on being heard, even if it means using unethical methods, Balram's self-narration, on the other hand, embodies Spivak's challenge.

The sociological insight of Goldmann (1975), who maintained that literature reflects collective social realities, is embodied by Bhola and Manju. Their struggles are similar to those of innumerable Indian youth who are torn between personal ambitions and systemic limitations. The novels by Chatterjee and Adiga thus show that youth agency is rooted in material, institutional, and cultural realities rather than being abstract. Their characters represent what Giroux refers to as "border youth" "individuals who negotiate conflicting realities, rejecting imposed identities and reimagining possibilities for the future (Giroux 59). Here, literature serves as a transformative platform where young people's voices confront systems that aim to silence them, advancing both cultural critique and educational dialogue.

Comparative Analysis: Tharoor, Chatterjee, and Adiga

Despite Aravind Adiga, Upamanyu Chatterjee, and Shashi Tharoor all explore the issue of youth agency and the right to speak, their literary approaches and focuses are very different. Tharoor depicts young characters with a moral empathy that highlights their vulnerability within systems of hypocrisy and spectacle, whereas Chatterjee and Adiga use satire and transgression to demonstrate how youth confront or subvert institutional structures. In Tharoor's title story *The Five-Dollar Smile* (1990), the orphaned protagonist is used as a tool for charity propaganda. A poster proclaims: "*MAKE THIS CHILD SMILE AGAIN*" (Tharoor 13), transforming the child's uniqueness into a catchphrase. Here, speech is appropriated by organizations that benefit from the suffering of young people rather than being self-asserted. Echoing his larger concern with the sentimental exploitation of the weak, Tharoor criticizes the commodification and silencing of young voices. He invites the reader to understand the child's subjectivity behind the sloganized image, which makes his irony incisive but ultimately empathetic. According to Tharoor's story, the right to speak is about more than just expressing oneself; it's also about rescuing humanity from institutional erasure.

In contrast, Chatterjee portrays young people as disenchanting and alienated within India's social and bureaucratic structures. The conflict between personal detachment and institutional expectations is embodied by Agastya Sen in *English, August* (1988). His assertion "*We are men without ambition, and all we want is to be left alone, in peace so that we can try and be happy*" (Chatterjee 112) registers a voice of withdrawal rather than empowerment. The protagonists of Chatterjee express existential estrangement, in contrast to Tharoor's characters, who endure hardships but manage to remain likable figures for moral criticism. Since their speech frequently conveys a failure to adapt to social expectations, alienation is a form of resistance in and of itself. Institutions, in Chatterjee's satire, do not just silence youth; they render their voices absurd or ineffectual. Adiga employs yet another tactic: his young characters use voice as a tool for drastic change. In *The White Tiger* (2008), Balram Halwai uses his life story as a confession and a manifesto as he tells it to a Chinese premier. His claim "*I am tomorrow*" (Adiga 276) is an act of rhetorical self-creation, a declaration that his voice can rewrite the social hierarchies that once constrained him. Unlike Tharoor's orphan, who is spoken for, or Chatterjee's Agastya, who retreats into irony, Balram weaponizes narration to dismantle imposed identities. In this case, the voice of the student or young person becomes not only expressive but also rebellious, calling for a change in the socio-political structure. Critics point out that even in cases where that agency is morally compromised, Adiga's work turns youth speech into a type of "entrepreneurial self-fashioning" (Sharma 2012, 45).

This comparison reveals two significant areas of difference. In terms of tone and moral position, Tharoor's satire is ultimately healing, highlighting human vulnerability while exposing institutional cruelty (Tharoor 15). With a more caustic tone, Chatterjee diagnoses the psychological toll of bureaucratic inertia without proposing a solution (Chatterjee 210). Adiga, on the other hand, writes with polemical urgency, turning youth speech into a weapon

for violent social advancement (Adiga 285). Second, the role of speech: in Chatterjee, speech signifies futility and alienation; in Tharoor, speech draws attention to the exploitation of youth and demands empathy; and in Adiga, speech itself is power an act of rebellion that rewrites fate. This contrast is made clear when a textual triangulation is placed side by side. The adoption of Tharoor is reduced to a catchphrase: *"MAKE THIS CHILD SMILE AGAIN"* (Tharoor 13). Chatterjee's Agastya retreats into apathy: *"We are men without ambition..."* (Chatterjee 112). Adiga's Balram asserts futurity: *"I am tomorrow"* (Adiga 276). These three lines exemplify how each writer positions youth voice differently silenced, alienated, or insurgent. In conclusion, Tharoor's examination of young characters is different from that of Chatterjee and Adiga. While Adiga portrays youth as transgressive narrators of their own liberation and Chatterjee offers a satire of alienation, Tharoor uses a more compassionate, morally restorative irony to criticize the institutional exploitation of young lives. Instead of being nihilists or rebels, his young characters expose the hypocrisies of society and call for acceptance. By placing youth agency within the moral imperative of reclaiming humanity from systemic appropriation, Tharoor thus offers a unique viewpoint to contemporary Indian English fiction.

In the end, the examination of student voice and youth agency in Upamanyu Chatterjee and Aravind Adiga's fiction reveals how modern Indian English literature challenges young people's capacity to assert their right to speak in a culture characterized by ingrained hierarchies, institutional restraints, and moral ambiguities. Through their unique narrative styles, both novelists reinterpret young people in literature as conflicted, inquisitive, and resistant individuals who negotiate, refuse, or reinvent rather than as passive heirs to tradition. This literary reimagining has implications for our understanding of student agency in educational and social systems, as well as for comprehending the politics of narrative voice. Irony, disaffection, and disconnection permeate the voices of the young protagonists in Chatterjee's writing, particularly in *English*, *August*, and *Weight Loss*. The weariness of institutional demands and the psychological fragmentation they cause are expressed by characters such as Agastya Sen. His statement, "We are men without ambition," captures the spirit of a generation torn between individual aspirations and structural stagnation. Youth speech in this context is depressing rather than triumphant, emphasizing apathy, retreat, and silence as substitute forms of resistance. By embracing alienation, itself and revealing the fallacy of cultural and bureaucratic norms, Chatterjee's young characters assert their right to speak without overtly claiming agency. By refusing to participate in society's game, their voices criticize it.

Adiga, on the other hand, portrays youth voice as transformative, polemical, and insurgent. Speech becomes both confessional and rebellious in *The White Tiger* and *Selection Day*, a way to upend social structures and create new identities. Adiga's view of young people as enterprising individuals who embrace language as a tool for mobility, even at the expense of moral compromise, is embodied in Balram Halwai's statement, "I am tomorrow." Similar to this, Manju Kumar in *Selection Day* highlights how young people negotiate and defy institutional authority by voicing the conflicts of being torn between personal freedom, athletic aspirations, and familial control. According to Adiga, asserting the right to speak entails actively changing the narrative that has been imposed by caste, class, or parental expectations. His young characters are re-authoring themselves, not just talking. taken together, these portrayals imply that Adiga and Chatterjee provide complementary viewpoints on youth agency. Adiga emphasizes the radical potential of self-narration in resisting oppression, while Chatterjee stresses the psychological costs of institutional pressures and the ironic detachment that ensues. Both emphasize how important student voice is to comprehending modern Indian identity: young characters undermine the authority of

structures that try to control them, whether through insurgent speech or alienated silence. Their difficulties reflect larger issues that Indian youth face as they balance modernity, globalization, and tradition. In the end, Chatterjee and Adiga's fiction affirms that young people's voices, despite their conflicts, need to be heard as change agents and critics. They show that asserting the right to speak is a range of negotiations that increase the potential for individuality and socio-political consciousness, rather than a single or consistent process. These negotiations can range from rhetorical insurgency to ironic withdrawal. Since student and youth perspectives are essential to reimagining institutional, cultural, and national futures, literature thus becomes a transformative space where youth speech is not only represented but also legitimized.

Works Cited

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. HarperCollins, 2008.

Selection Day. Scribner, 2016.

Chatterjee, Upamanyu. *English, August: An Indian Story*. Faber & Faber, 1988.

Weight Loss. Viking, 2006.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos, Continuum, 2000.

Giroux, Henry A. *Youth in a Suspect Society: Democracy or Disposability?* Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

Kumar, Amitava. "The Fiction of a New India: Globalization and the Literature of Youth." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2009, pp. 139–149.

Sharma, Meenakshi. "Entrepreneurial Voice and Moral Compromise in *The White Tiger*." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2012, pp. 40–58.

Tharoor, Shashi. *The Five-Dollar Smile and Other Stories*. Penguin, 1990.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Chandra, N. D. R. "The White Tiger: Voice of the Subaltern." *Indian Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2010, pp. 55–70.

Gopal, Priyamvada. *The Indian English Novel: Nation, History and Narration*. Oxford UP, 2009.

Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity*. Ohio State UP, 2009.

Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Twice-Born Fiction: Themes and Techniques of the Indian Novel in English*. Heinemann, 1971.

Nayar, Pramod K. *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction*. Pearson, 2008.

Pathak, R. S. "Negotiating Identity: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and the New India." *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, pp. 19–32.

Pordzik, Ralph. "Postcolonial Agency in Contemporary Indian Fiction." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2009, pp. 25–42.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, 1993.

Sharma, Sandhya. "Education, Class, and the Failure of Institutions in Upamanyu Chatterjee's Fiction." *South Asian Review*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2013, pp. 85–101.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988, pp. 271–313.

Thieme, John. *Postcolonial Con-Texts: Writing Back to the Canon*. Continuum, 2001.

Author's bio-note

Mallavalli Thambi Rani is a Research Scholar in the Department of English and Other Foreign Languages (EOFL) at Vignan's Institute of Science, Technology & Research (Deemed to be University), Vadlamudi, Andhra Pradesh, India. She has over seven years of teaching experience in English language and literature, communication skills, and soft skills at the higher education level. Currently serving as an Assistant Professor of English, her academic interests include postcolonial literature, diaspora studies, social marginality, identity, psychological trauma, and contemporary Indian English fiction. Her doctoral research focuses on *Social Marginality, Aspirations, and Identity in the Selected Works of Aravind Adiga and Upamanyu Chatterjee*. She has presented research papers at national and international conferences and is actively engaged in scholarly publications. She can be contacted at mallavallithambiramesh@gmail.com

Dr. Shah Al Mamun Sarkar is Assistant Professor of English at VFSTR Deemed to be University, Guntur. He earned his PhD from IIT ISM Dhanbad (2018) and specializes in Children's Literature, Folk Literature, Comics and Graphic Novels, Indian Writing in English, and Film as Text. With over 8 years of teaching experience, he's published in several Scopus and Web of Science journals, presented at least 15 national and international conferences, and has 7 Google Scholar citations. He also co-edited a book on Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*. Orcid Id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9019-6577> Contact: shahalmamunsarkar@gmail.com
