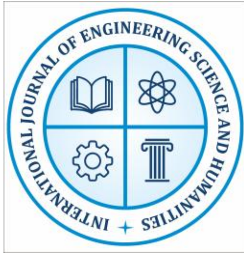

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Irony As Ethical Mirror: Religious Hypocrisy, Moral Collapse, And The Politics Of Faith In The Select Works Of Aravind Adiga And Arundhati Roy

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ABSTRACT

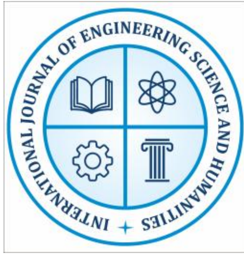
This paper undertakes a theoretical and comparative literary analysis of religious irony, moral hypocrisy, and ethical collapse as depicted in four major works of contemporary Indian English fiction: The White Tiger (2008) and Last Man in Tower (2011) by Aravind Adiga, and The God of Small Things (1997) and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) by Arundhati Roy. Drawing on postcolonial theory, Marxist criticism, feminist ethics, and moral realism, the paper argues that both authors deploy irony not merely as a stylistic device but as a rigorous ethical instrument that exposes the contradictions embedded within religious institutions, caste hierarchies, and capitalist modernity in postliberalization India. Through close reading of primary texts supported by insights from theorists including Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Terry Eagleton, and Michel Foucault, the paper demonstrates how faith, when institutionalized, becomes complicit in sustaining oppression, commodifying morality, and silencing subaltern voices. The paper further identifies significant convergences and divergences between Adiga's urban-realist satire and Roy's lyrical-political dissent, concluding that both writers position irony as literature's most potent moral weapon.

Keywords: religious irony, moral hypocrisy, postcolonial Indian fiction, Aravind Adiga, Arundhati Roy, caste, capitalism, subaltern ethics, faith and literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Indian English fiction has emerged as one of the most significant sites for the interrogation of religious authority and moral legitimacy in postcolonial modernity. Rooted in the tensions of a society negotiating caste hierarchies, capitalist transformation, communal violence, and the residual weight of colonial knowledge systems, the novel in India has developed a sophisticated critical vocabulary for examining what Eagleton (2003) calls "the moral life as it is lived rather than as it is theorized" (p. 22). In this tradition, Aravind Adiga and Arundhati Roy stand as two of the most powerful and morally urgent voices of their generation.

The title of this paper — Irony as Ethical Mirror — captures its central claim: that literary irony in the works of both authors functions not merely as rhetorical technique but as an



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epistemological and ethical instrument. By inverting the apparent meanings of religious devotion, moral piety, and social respectability, irony forces the reader to confront the gap between what society proclaims and what it practises. As Linda Hutcheon (1994) argues, irony is never innocent — it carries "the weight of social and political implication" (p. 10), making it uniquely suited to literary critiques of religious hypocrisy.

Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) and Last Man in Tower (2011) expose religious performance as a mechanism of class oppression in neoliberal urban India. Roy's The God of Small Things (1997) and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness (2017) extend this critique to encompass caste, gender, nationalism, and communal violence. Together, these four novels constitute a formidable literary challenge to the moral authority of religious institutions in India and, by extension, to the postcolonial state that deploys religion as an instrument of governance and control.

This paper proceeds through several interconnected theoretical and textual arguments. Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework. Sections 3 and 4 analyse Adiga's and Roy's novels respectively. Section 5 offers a comparative synthesis. Section 6 concludes by situating both authors within the tradition of literature as moral philosophy.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

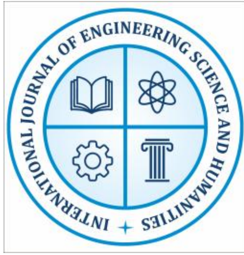
2.1 Irony as Moral Critique

The deployment of irony in literary texts has long been theorized as an ethically charged rhetorical act. Wayne Booth's foundational work A Rhetoric of Irony (1974) establishes that stable irony functions by inviting the reader into a community of understanding from which the ironized position is explicitly excluded. In the context of religious and moral discourse, this mechanism becomes particularly powerful: to ironize a prayer, a ritual, or a moral pronouncement is to simultaneously acknowledge its social power and expose its ideological emptiness. D. C. Muecke (1969) further observes that irony is "a way of saying one thing and meaning another" that always implies "a superior position" in the ironist (p. 14).

For the purposes of this paper, irony is understood as both a narrative technique and an ideological stance — a mode through which fiction exercises what Eagleton (2003) describes as "the moral imagination" (p. 45). This conception draws on the Bakhtinian notion of heteroglossia: the coexistence within a text of multiple, competing voices and moral registers that prevent any single worldview — including religious authority — from achieving unchallenged dominance (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 263).

2.2 Postcolonial and Subaltern Ethics

Postcolonial theory, particularly as articulated by Said (1978), Spivak (1988), and Bhabha (1994), provides an indispensable framework for reading the ironization of religion in Indian fiction. Said's concept of "orientalism" — the systematic production of the colonial Other



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through discourse — illuminates how religious categories (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, untouchable) are not merely theological but political constructs that organize power and distribute privilege. In postcolonial India, as Spivak (1988) argues, the subaltern — particularly women and lower-caste subjects — cannot easily "speak" within dominant religious and social frameworks because those frameworks actively construct their silence (p. 283).

This theoretical lens allows us to read Adiga's and Roy's irony as an act of epistemic recovery: by exposing the gap between religious rhetoric and social reality, both authors give narrative form to experiences and perspectives that official morality systematically suppresses.

2.3 Marxist and Moral Realist Perspectives

From a Marxist standpoint, religion functions, in Marx's famous formulation, as "the opium of the people" — a palliative that deflects class consciousness and naturalizes oppression (Marx, 1844/1970, p. 131). Terry Eagleton's (2003) sophisticated reworking of this position recognizes that while religion can indeed serve ideological functions of domination, it also contains within itself resources of resistance and ethical renewal. Both Adiga and Roy engage this ambivalence: religion in their novels is never simply false consciousness but a contested terrain on which moral struggles are continuously fought.

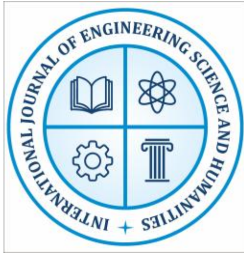
Moral realism, as developed by Iris Murdoch (1970), insists on the existence of moral truths that exceed social construction. Murdoch's insistence that genuine moral attention requires the "unselfing" of the perceiving subject — a willingness to see others in their full reality rather than through the distorting lens of ego, class, or religious prejudice — offers a productive counterpoint to the moral relativism that Adiga's characters inhabit and that Roy's characters struggle to transcend (Murdoch, 1970, p. 84).

3. THE IRONIZATION OF FAITH IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S FICTION

3.1 The White Tiger: From Religious Fatalism to Moral Nihilism

The White Tiger is structured as a confessional letter from Balram Halwai, a former domestic servant turned entrepreneur, addressed to the Chinese Premier. This framing device is itself profoundly ironic: Balram's confession parodies the religious confessional form while emptying it of any redemptive content. Religion in the novel appears primarily as social performance and cognitive constraint. The "Rooster Coop" metaphor — Adiga's central image for the ideological structure that prevents the poor from rebelling — is maintained not by physical force alone but by religious fatalism. As Balram observes:

> *"The Indian family is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop. The coop is guarded from the inside. They eat from the same pots and they don't know they're in a cage" (Adiga, 2008, p. 175).*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The Hindu cosmological framework of karma and dharma — the belief that one's social position reflects cosmic justice — is deployed throughout the novel as an instrument of class domination. Balram's landlords invoke religious duty to justify exploitation: "God made you a servant, Balram, not a master" (Adiga, 2008, p. 44). Adiga's irony operates here through the gap between the grandeur of cosmic language and the smallness of its social function: religion does not elevate the spirit but chains the body.

Muraleeswari and Deivasahayam (2022) observe that Balram's eventual act of murder — killing his master Ashok — can be read as a dialectical negation of religious morality in the Marxian sense: a violent rupture with the ideological system that sustains class oppression. Yet Adiga refuses the consolation of moral heroism. Balram is not a revolutionary but a capitalist; he replaces one form of exploitation with another, suggesting that moral nihilism — the collapse of shared ethical frameworks — is not liberation but its ironic double.

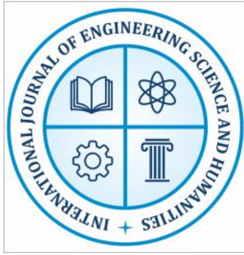
3.2 Last Man in Tower: The Commodification of Community Ethics

In Last Man in Tower, Adiga extends his moral critique from individual psychology to collective social life. The Vishram Society cooperative housing society in Mumbai embodies a form of everyday ethics — what Foucault (1977) might call a "microphysics of power" (p. 26) organized through shared rituals, religious observances, and community obligations. When the builder Dharmen Shah offers a lucrative buyout for the building, this moral architecture rapidly collapses.

The novel's most devastating irony lies in the behaviour of the residents toward Masterji, the retired schoolteacher who alone refuses the buyout. The same neighbours who participated in Diwali celebrations and birthday prayers now conspire to isolate, intimidate, and ultimately murder him. Adiga (2011) renders this collapse with surgical precision:

> *"They had shared festivals, illnesses, weddings, funerals. They had thought they were a community. Now each one knew the truth: they had only shared money" (Adiga, 2011, p. 204).*

Dinesh (2022) situates this collapse within the framework of Harvey's concept of "accumulation by dispossession," arguing that capitalism does not merely coexist with traditional moral communities but actively dissolves them by converting every relationship into an economic transaction. Religion in Last Man in Tower has become what Eagleton (2003) calls "bad faith" — the deployment of moral and spiritual vocabulary to sanctify material interests (p. 89). The irony is structural rather than merely rhetorical: the building that was a site of moral community becomes a site of murder, and prayer becomes the alibi of violence.



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4. SACRED VIOLENCE AND MORAL RESISTANCE IN ARUNDHATI ROY'S FICTION

4.1 The God of Small Things: Caste, Christian Orthodoxy, and the Law of Love

Arundhati Roy's debut novel is a formally and politically radical text that interrogates the intersection of Christian religious authority, Syrian Christian caste identity, and patriarchal social law in Kerala. The novel's central tragedy — the forbidden love between Ammu, a high-caste woman, and Velutha, an untouchable Paravan man — is structured as a confrontation between what Roy calls "the Love Laws" and the human capacity for genuine moral feeling.

Roy's irony in this novel operates through juxtaposition: the language of Christian love and grace is systematically deployed to enforce caste exclusion and social punishment. Baby Kochamma, the novel's moral hypocrite par excellence, converted to Catholicism out of romantic infatuation with a priest, yet she becomes the primary agent of persecution against Ammu and Velutha. As Roy (1997) writes:

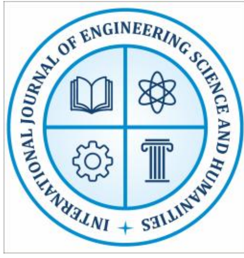
> *"She had a hole in the middle where her love for Father Mulligan had been, the emptiness his going had left. Into it she poured religion, reciting the Rosary with obsessive regularity" (Roy, 1997, p. 28).*

This characterization exemplifies what Nayar (2008) identifies as Roy's postcolonial feminist strategy of "exposing the gendered complicity of religious institutions in maintaining caste hierarchies" (p. 142). The church in the novel is not simply hypocritical in a personal sense; it is structurally complicit in the caste system. The denial of a Christian burial to Ammu because of her transgression of caste-sexual norms reveals the theological contortions through which religious institutions simultaneously claim universal love and enforce particular exclusions.

Roy's most powerful ironic device is the phrase "the Love Laws" — the rules that specify "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (Roy, 1997, p. 33). By naming these laws in the language of love, Roy exposes their perversion: they are not laws that enable love but laws that prohibit it, that transform the most intimate human impulse into an instrument of social control. Sekher (2022) argues that these laws represent "the ideological superstructure through which patriarchy and caste reproduce themselves in the register of the sacred" (p. 95).

4.2 The Ministry of Utmost Happiness: Faith as Contested Terrain

Roy's second novel, published twenty years after the first, extends the critique of religious hypocrisy to a national and political scale. The Ministry of Utmost Happiness is a polyphonic narrative that weaves together stories of hijras, Kashmiri militants, Dalit activists, and urban intellectuals to construct a panoramic vision of India's moral and political crisis in the post-Babri Masjid era.



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The novel's protagonist, Anjum, is a hijra who lives in a graveyard — itself a profoundly ironic image, since the graveyard becomes the most inclusive, most morally serious space in a novel populated by exclusive communities and violent nationalisms. Roy (2017) describes Anjum's faith:

> *"She was the wrong sort of Muslim. She prayed, but she mixed up her prayers. She'd begin with "Bismillah ir-rahman ir-rahim" and end with "Jai Mata Di." Why not? she thought. Both were the same thing"* (Roy, 2017, p. 9).

This syncretic religiosity — this refusal of doctrinal purity — is Roy's alternative to the institutionalized faith that enforces exclusion. USTM (2022) reads Anjum as embodying "a postcolonial feminist spirituality that subverts the nationalist appropriation of religion by grounding faith in the body, in suffering, and in solidarity" (p. 47). Anjum's graveyard becomes a sanctuary precisely because it is outside the organized community of the living — outside the communal violence that religion, in this novel, perpetually threatens to unleash.

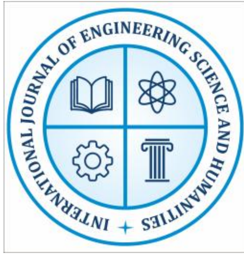
The political dimension of the novel's religious irony is most explicit in its treatment of communalism. Roy depicts the organized deployment of Hindu nationalist rhetoric to justify anti-Muslim violence as a form of moral inversion: the language of sacred duty and national purity is used to license murder. As Baneth-Nouailhetas (2002) observes of Roy's narrative method, "the horror is always rendered through beauty, and the beauty through horror — this is the fundamental irony of Roy's moral vision" (p. 67).

5. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES

5.1 Shared Moral Preoccupations

Despite their significant formal and stylistic differences, Adiga and Roy share a set of fundamental moral preoccupations that unite their projects as ethical literature. Both writers are concerned with what Williams (1985) calls "moral residue" — the recognition that moral systems always leave behind remainders, victims, and unresolvable ethical contradictions (p. 174). In both Adiga's and Roy's fictional worlds, religion is the institution that most conspicuously fails to account for these remainders.

Both writers deploy irony as their primary ethical tool precisely because irony, unlike direct moral instruction, preserves the complexity and contradiction of moral experience. As Booth (1974) argues, irony creates "a fellowship of the knowing" (p. 28) that invites readers into an active, critical relationship with the text. This pedagogical function of irony is particularly important in the context of religious hypocrisy: readers are not told that religion is hypocritical but are shown the gap between religious profession and moral behaviour, and left to draw their own conclusions.



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Both authors also share a deep engagement with questions of caste and class. Adiga approaches these through the lens of urban capitalism and economic mobility; Roy through the lens of postcolonial feminism and subaltern experience. But in both cases, religion appears as the ideological medium through which caste and class hierarchies are naturalized and reproduced. Chakrabarty (2000) observes that the persistence of caste in modern India cannot be explained by economic factors alone but requires attention to the "theological-political complex" that makes certain hierarchies appear cosmically ordained rather than socially produced (p. 16).

5.2 Key Divergences: Satire versus Lyrical Resistance

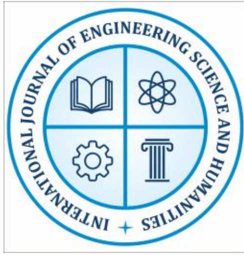
The most significant divergence between Adiga and Roy lies in the moral horizon of their irony. Adiga's irony tends toward what Muecke (1969) calls "tragic irony" — the revelation of a gap between human aspiration and human reality that offers no redemptive resolution (p. 102). Balram Halwai's escape from the Rooster Coop does not inaugurate a new moral order; it reproduces the old one under new management. Masterji's moral resistance in Last Man in Tower ends in murder. Adiga's moral universe is one in which the corrupt tend to prosper and the ethical tend to perish.

Roy's moral imagination, by contrast, is more capacious. While she is equally clear-eyed about the scale of moral failure in Indian society, her novels consistently open spaces of what Nussbaum (1990) calls "narrative imagination" — the capacity to inhabit other lives and other moral worlds through the medium of storytelling (p. 47). Anjum's graveyard, the small acts of solidarity and tenderness that punctuate The God of Small Things and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, suggest that moral renewal is possible, even if it is fragile and always threatened.

This difference reflects divergent aesthetic philosophies. Adiga writes in the tradition of the realist satirist — Dickens, Swift, early Naipaul — for whom the exposure of social evil is itself the moral act. Roy writes in the tradition of the lyrical-political novelist — García Márquez, Morrison, Rushdie — for whom the beauty of form is inseparable from the politics of content. Both traditions have their ethical justifications; together, they demonstrate the range and resourcefulness of the literary moral imagination in contemporary Indian English fiction.

6. LITERATURE AS MORAL PHILOSOPHY: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF ETHICS AND RELIGION

The foregoing analysis raises a broader theoretical question: what can literary fiction do that philosophical or theological discourse cannot? This question is particularly acute in the context of religious hypocrisy, because the critique of religious hypocrisy is itself a long-standing religious and philosophical tradition — from the Hebrew prophets to the Enlightenment philosophes. What distinctive contribution do Adiga and Roy make?



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The answer, this paper argues, lies in what Nussbaum (1990) calls the "perceptive equilibrium" that literary fiction enables — the capacity to hold abstract principles and concrete human particulars in tension simultaneously (p. 37). Philosophical discourse on religious hypocrisy tends toward the general and the systematic; literary fiction insists on the particular, the embodied, the felt. When Balram Halwai invokes Hindu deities while planning murder, or when Baby Kochamma recites the Rosary while engineering the destruction of innocent lives, the irony is not merely intellectual but visceral — it implicates the reader in a moral reckoning that abstract argument cannot replicate.

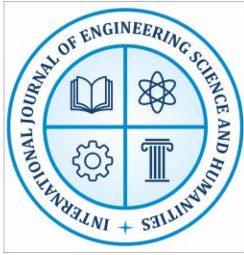
Furthermore, both Adiga and Roy demonstrate that the critique of religious hypocrisy is inseparable from the critique of social structure. As Foucault (1977) argues, morality is never merely a matter of individual intention but always imbricated in systems of power, discipline, and normalization (p. 222). The hypocrisy of Adiga's and Roy's characters is not the result of individual moral failure alone but of social systems that make hypocrisy advantageous — that reward religious performance over moral substance, and that punish those who insist on the integrity of faith.

This has significant implications for what Sen (2006) calls "the idea of justice" — the recognition that justice cannot be achieved by appealing to ideal principles alone but requires attention to the actual social arrangements and power relations that produce injustice (p. 26). Adiga and Roy are, in this sense, practical moralists: they do not offer abstract ideals of religious virtue but diagnose the concrete social mechanisms through which religious institutions produce and reproduce moral failure.

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that irony functions as the primary ethical instrument in the selected works of Aravind Adiga and Arundhati Roy, enabling both authors to expose the gap between religious profession and moral practice in contemporary India with an urgency and precision that neither philosophical argument nor sociological analysis alone can achieve. Through close readings of The White Tiger, Last Man in Tower, The God of Small Things, and The Ministry of Utmost Happiness, the paper has demonstrated that religious irony in these texts operates simultaneously at the levels of narrative technique, ideological critique, and moral philosophy.

Adiga's realist satire exposes the commodification of faith under urban capitalism, revealing religion as an ideological apparatus that sustains class oppression and moral nihilism. Roy's lyrical political fiction extends this critique to encompass caste, gender, communal violence, and nationalist authoritarianism, while insisting, with greater optimism than Adiga, on the possibility of moral resistance and spiritual renewal at the margins. Together, these four novels constitute a major contribution to what might be called the literature of moral reckoning in postcolonial India



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— a body of work that uses the resources of fiction to hold society accountable to the values it professes but consistently betrays. In doing so, they fulfil what Eagleton (2003) identifies as one of literature's most enduring functions: to make the moral life visible in all its complexity, contradiction, and urgency (p. 13).

Future research might extend this comparative framework to include other contemporary Indian English novelists — such as Jeet Thayil, Kiran Desai, or Romesh Gunesekera — who similarly engage with the politics of faith and moral failure, thereby mapping the broader landscape of ethical irony in South Asian literature in English.

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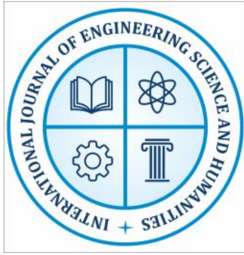

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