

**Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'**



**Discipline Courses-I  
Semester-I**

**Paper: Indian Writing in English**

**Lesson: Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'**

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## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

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#### Brief Biographical Details

Aravind Adiga was born on 23 October 1974 in Madras (now called Chennai), and grew up in Mangalore, by the Malabar Coast, in the south of India. He attended Canara High School and later St. Aloysius High School where he completed his SSLC in 1990. He then immigrated to Sydney, Australia along with his family, where he joined James Ruse Agricultural High School. He studied English literature at Columbia University in New York and at Magdalen College, Oxford.



<http://www.aravindadiga.com/index.html>

Aravind began his career as an intern at the *Financial Times* as a financial journalist. He was later hired by *TIME magazine*, where he served for three years as a South Asia correspondent, following which he left the job and became a freelance journalist in 2006. His journalistic stint in India took him to many parts of the country and gave him the opportunity to observe Indian society and life at close quarters. His debut

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

novel, *The White Tiger*, won the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 2008. A second novel, *Last Man in Tower*, was published in 2011. He currently resides in Mumbai, India.



<http://www.theguardian.com/profile/aravindadiga>

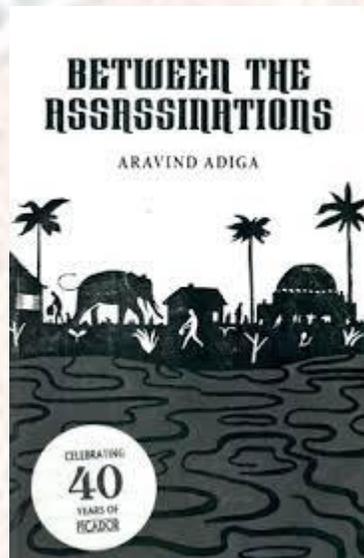
ARAVIND ADIGA IS THE FOURTH INDIAN TO WIN THE BOOKER PRIZE AFTER SALMAN RUSHDIE IN 1981 FOR *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*, ARUNDHATI ROY IN 1997 FOR *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*, AND KIRAN DESAI IN 2006 FOR *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS*.

### About the book

*Between the Assassinations* was written before *The White Tiger* though it was published after it, within a month of its publication, in 2008. Shruti Debi, Editor, Picador India, publisher of the book for the Indian sub-continent, told *Deccan Herald*: “*Between...* is a collection of short stories and is actually Aravind’s first book, but we wanted his novel to come out first as that makes it easy for an author to be established. We had signed up Aravind around mid- 2006.” An abridged version of one of the stories — The Sultan’s Battery — was published in *The Guardian* on October 18.

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

The title refers to the period in India between the assassination of Indira Gandhi and her son Rajiv Gandhi, that is, the years between 1984 and 1991. It is a collection of twelve inter-related short stories set in Kittur, a town in between Goa and Calicut, on the south-



western coast of India. The writer has clarified that this is not the actual town named Kittur in the interior of the Belgaum district of Karnataka, but is completely fictitious. It is a coastal town situated on the Malabar Coast, with its own natural harbor and port called Bunder. Adiga appeals to the multicultural sensibilities of his readers and invites them to spend at least a week to observe life in the town in its multifarious shades. Adiga frames the book as a guided tour of the region. The book opens with a note, "HOW TO GET TO KITTUR":

Kittur is on India's south-western coast, in between Goa and Calicut, and almost equidistant from the two. The Arabian Sea is to its west, and the Kaliamma river to its

## **Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'**

east. The terrain of the town is hilly; the soil is black and mildly acidic. The monsoons arrive in June, and besiege the town through September. The next three months are dry and cool, and are the best time to visit Kittur. Given the town's richness of history and scenic beauty, and diversity of religion, race and language, a minimum stay of a week is recommended (1).

In keeping with the authorial recommendation, the book is divided into seven days, with at least a story for each day. "DAY TWO" unfolds four stories while "DAY FIVE" and "DAY SIX" each encapsulate two stories each making a total of twelve tales. The twelve stories may be viewed as representing each of the seven intervening years between 1984 and 1991. Interspersed between the stories are topographical, historical, linguistic and census details of the town of Kittur- "HOW OUR TOWN IS LAID OUT", "THE HISTORY OF KITTUR", "THE LANGUAGES OF KITTUR" and "KITTUR Total Population". A chronological history of events between 31 October 1984 and 21 May 1991 is appended at the end of the book. The absence of a 'Contents' page points to an authorial desire that the reader trust and follow the author on a guided tour of Kittur. Framed as a factual-fictional narrative, each story is prefixed by a note that describes the area of the town that Adiga has led the reader to- the train station, the Bunder, the textile sweatshops, the school, the local cinema theatre, the Christian neighbourhood. However, the story that follows the descriptions dwells not on the attractions of the local sights; but to the thriving underbelly of poverty, deceit, crime and violence around the area.

The stories follow the literary tradition of locating stories in a particular milieu as in R. K. Narayan's "Malgudi Days". Kittur is the quintessential Indian town of the period with its local sights, legends and history- the Kittamma Devi Temple, Angel Talkies- a pornographic cinema theatre, the Dargah of Hazrat Yusuf Ali, the Roman Catholic suburb of Valencia with the Cathedral of our Lady of Valencia, the Lighthouse Hill with

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

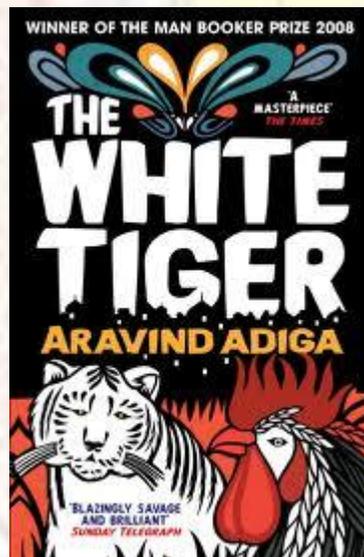
the lighthouse built by the Portuguese and renovated by the British, and Deshpri Hemachandra Rao Park named in honour of the freedom fighter who hung a tricolor from the lighthouse during British rule. The Sultan's Battery is a "black fort", a formidable fortress of black stone mounted with French guns, located south from the port or Bunder "which overlooks the road that leads out over the Kaliaamma River into Salt Market Village, the southernmost extension of Kittur" (*Between the Assassinations* 23). Adiga dates the history of the town from 1091 and traces its fortunes through the twelfth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to the time of the East India Company till 1921 when the freedom struggle reached Kittur.

Adiga is an observant chronicler of socio-cultural mores, of the attitudes and behavior of the spectrum of classes, and of social problems like lopsided economic growth and development, poverty and corruption. Kittur maps a microcosmic view of the Indian socio-cultural landscape across classes, religions, professions and predilections. The first story begins in the mode of a tourist guide narration with the assumption that the reader is a passenger disembarking from the Madras Mail and "the arches of the train station frame your [her] first view of Kittur". The second sentence zooms in on the dirt and squalor that will greet the visitor, "The station is dim, dirty, and littered with discarded lunch bags that stray dogs poke their noses into; in the evening, the rats come out." (3). Caste, class, and religion are the strong undercurrents that circulate in the majority of the stories whose subject is the pathos, injustices and ironies of Indian life. There is a wealth of socio-historical and anthropological detail that documents aspects of life in a small Indian town. The characters struggle in debilitating circumstances of poverty, discrimination, bureaucratic corruption, disease, and ill-luck with their own unique strategy for survival in an extremely harsh and relentlessly challenging world. Each character; the teashop boy Ziauddin, the textile sweatshop

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

owner Abbasi, the Dalit bookseller Xerox; is minutely observed and painstakingly fleshed out complete with rabbit teeth, tufts of ear-hair, smelly feet, farts and all.

When criticized for focusing on the poverty and misery of India, Adiga says, "At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society (Indian). That's what I'm trying to do – it is not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination." He explains that "the criticism by writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens of the 19th century helped England and France become better societies".

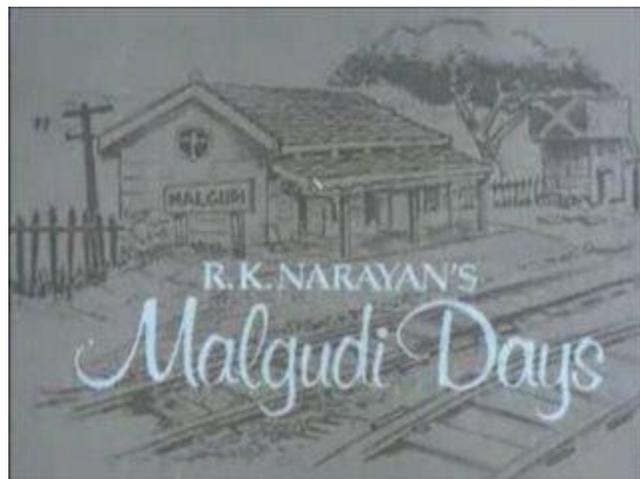
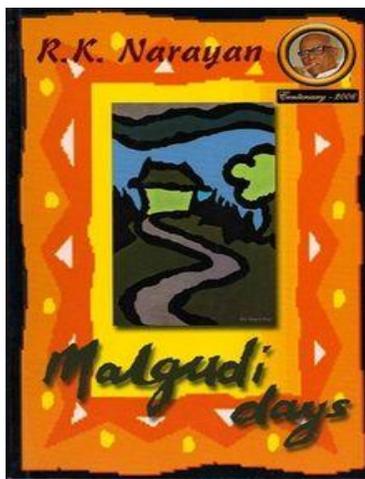


Amitava Kumar, in his review of *The White Tiger*, comments that Adiga's novel had been born out of his experiences as a journalist in India. "He [Adiga] had travelled to various parts of the country, including places whose backwardness had shocked his sensibility. *The White Tiger* was his rebuke of the cheerful, and false, notion of a new, transformed India" (*The Hindu*, Literary Review, Nov 2, 2008).

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* published in 1943 is a collection of nineteen short stories all set in the fictional South Indian town of Malgudi. The semi-urban town is first introduced in his semi-autobiographical debut work *Swami and Friends*, published in 1935, and also provides the fictional topography for its successor, *The Bachelor of Arts*. The location figured in many of his subsequent works such as *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, *A Tiger for Malgudi*.

Malgudi serves as the fictional backdrop to fifteen of R. K. Narayan's novels and many short stories and has been bestowed with its own fictional river Sarayu and Mempi forest. It has its distinctive streets- Market Street, Kabir Street, Lawley Extension- cinema, school and railway station. R. K. Narayan excels in capturing the commonplace and the trivia of human existence and his Malgudi town and its residents could be any and every town in South India.



Graham Greene, friend and admirer of Narayan, and who helped him to publish his initial works, commented, "Malgudi is a real place with which we have been as familiar as with our own birth place. We know, like the streets of childhood, Market Road, the snuff stalls, the vendors of toothpaste, the Regal Hair Cutting Saloon, the river (Sarayu) and the railway". Add to that the Kabir Street pyols, little temples, treadle printing presses, Gaffur's taxi and the reading room, and you see the whole place pulsating with human activity of the kind that is memorable for its ordinariness".

In 1986 a few of the stories were picturised in a television series, also called *Malgudi Days*, directed by Shankar Nag.

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

### "The Sultan's Battery"

Genre: Short story

Excerpted from: *Between the Assassinations*. London: Picador, 2008.

The "Sultan's Battery" is the first of the two stories narrated on "DAY SIX". It is prefixed with the shortest of authorial introductions, a mere one-line about the Sultan's Battery being one of the "prime tourist attractions of Kittur". The story opens with the protagonist Ratnakara Shetty hurrying towards the Dargah of Yusuf Ali with the paraphernalia of his trade- a wooden stool, a red bag containing an album of photographs and seven bottles full of white pills. The reader had earlier been informed in the section "THE HISTORY OF KITTUR" that:

In the fourteenth century a dervish named Yusuf Ali began curing lepers in the Bunder; when he died, his body was entombed in a white dome, and the structure- the Dargah of Hazrat Yusuf Ali- has remained an object of pilgrimage to the present day (*Between the Assassinations* 113).

Adiga offers a grim view of the "sorrowful parade of humanity" stationed both along the front of the Dargah, "the long line of beggars along the wall: the lepers who were sitting on rags, the men with mutilated arms and legs, the men in wheelchairs...", and the counterfeit articles vendors' peddling their wares behind the Dargah. The protagonist of the story is a typical roadside quack sexologist, Ratnakara Shetty, who sells fake cures for venereal diseases behind the Dargah in Kittur. On his way home in the evenings, he doubles as a salesman in the 34B bus he travels by, peddling general knowledge books needed to "pass the civil service entrance examination, the bank entrance examination, the police entrance examination and many other exams which are needed to win the rat race", and gets a free ride in the bargain. As he alights at the bus stand, he peddles

## **Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'**

pens, cheap toys and amusements to the passengers waiting there. He needs to raise money for the dowries for his three daughters. Ironically, the very first suitor to come forward to marry his eldest daughter turns out to be afflicted with a sexually transmitted disease. Having heard the woes of the many young men who came to Ratna in desperate search of a cure; he can instantly recognize the symptoms of venereal disease in the post-urination burning sensations suffered by the prospective groom when he relieves himself. However corrupt and glib-talking Ratnakara Shetty may be for the general public, he is not completely heartless and indifferent. He feeds the neighbourhood dogs every day and takes pity on the prospective groom who desperately seeks his help. Ratnakara is sincere in his efforts to help the afflicted suitor he has rejected for his daughter and accompanies him to consult a qualified sexologist. Although Ratnakara had threatened that he would not help the boy without charging a fee, he refuses the money offered to him. "It was pure public service on my part, remember that. We aren't related: there's no blood in common between us" (232).

The story documents resourcefulness and never-say-die spirit of human endeavor in the midst of excruciating squalor, poverty and misery. The beggar, "with little brown stubs like a seal's flippers where he should have had arms, a normal left leg, and a soft brown stump where he should have had a second leg", the half a mile long line of vendors selling fake shoes, T-shirts, sunglasses and everything else under the sun, Ratna selling fake pills to seriously sick men, the firecracker merchant's son,- all are circumscribed and hedged in by their peculiar destinies- yet they refuse to give up and instead pour in all their capacities for endurance to survive in a ruthless world.

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

### Glossary

**dervish:** A member of any of various Muslim ascetic orders, some of which perform whirling dances and vigorous chanting as acts of ecstatic devotion.

**protagonist:** the leading character or one of the major characters in a literary work, theatrical production, or film.

**quack:** an untrained and unqualified person who pretends to be a qualified doctor and dispenses medical treatment. Synonym: charlatan

### Some questions on the text

1. Compare and contrast the world of Rushdie's "The Free Radio" and that of Adiga's in "The Sultan's Battery".
2. Discuss the similarities and differences in the peculiar afflictions of Ramani, the protagonist of "The Free Radio" and the prospective groom in Adiga's "The Sultan's Battery".
3. Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* has been described as "an unflinching portrait of the dark side of modern India". Can this description be also applied to his short story "The Sultan's Battery"?
4. Explain the comment, "If there is satire in the story, it is couched in sympathy for the main actors that brings out their helplessness" with reference to Aravind Adiga's short story "The Sultan's Battery".

## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

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## Aravind Adiga : 'The Sultan's Battery'

### Further Reading

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Aravind Adiga. *Last Man in Tower*. 2011.

