



From Margins to Center: A Study of Power and Identity in The White Tiger by Arvind Adiga

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Abstract:

The White Tiger by Arvind Adiga offers a powerful critique of contemporary Indian society by exposing the sharp economic and social inequalities that exist beneath the country's image of rapid economic progress. The novel, which received the prestigious Man Booker Prize, presents the story of Balram Halwai, a poor village boy who rises to become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. The novel portrays India as a nation divided into two contrasting worlds: the "India of Light," representing prosperity and opportunity, and the "India of Darkness," symbolizing poverty, exploitation, and social oppression. The story highlights the deep-rooted corruption, class divisions, and exploitation that characterize modern Indian society. Adiga introduces the metaphor of the "Rooster Coop" to explain how the poor remain trapped in a system of servitude due to fear, loyalty to family, and social conditioning. Balram's transformation from an obedient servant into a self-made entrepreneur is both inspiring and disturbing, as it involves crime, betrayal, and moral compromise. His actions challenge conventional ideas of morality and raise questions about survival, ambition, and justice in a deeply unequal society.

Keywords: The White Tiger, Economic Inequality, Social Class Division, Rooster Coop Metaphor, Modern Indian Society, Entrepreneurship and Survival

Introduction

The Booker Prize awarded to the 35-year-old Chennai-born writer Arvind Adiga for his novel *The White Tiger* marked another significant achievement for Indian literature. The Booker Prize is considered one of the most prestigious literary awards given annually by Britain to writers from Commonwealth countries. Adiga himself viewed the novel as a political project. He explained that the book attempts to place India within a political and economic framework. While travelling along the Ganges River and observing the conditions of the people living there, he began to think about India from a completely new perspective.

The novel is written in the form of a series of letters addressed to the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao by Balram Halwai, a Bangalore-based entrepreneur who calls himself the "white tiger." Bangalore, often referred to as the Silicon Valley of India, becomes the backdrop of the narrative. On the eve of Jiabao's state visit to India, Balram writes these letters to reveal the hidden realities of modern India. Out of respect for the Chinese people's love of liberty and believing that the future belongs to the "yellow man and the brown man," he attempts to show the real condition of the country and prevent the Prime Minister from being misled by the idealized image of India presented by politicians.

India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India, the black river. The black river is the Ganges beloved of the sarees and spices tourist image of India. No; Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganges, unless you want your mouth to be full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion and several kinds of industrial acid, (14-15)

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga presents a powerful and unsettling portrayal of life in modern India, a country marked by sharp cultural and economic contrasts. Although India is rapidly emerging as a major economic power, a large section of its population remains untouched by this prosperity. This gap between wealth and poverty forms the central conflict that drives the narrative. The story is narrated by Balram Halwai, who serves as both the narrator and an anti-hero. His life story is revealed through a series of letters he writes from his small 150-square-foot office in Bangalore. Balram begins his life at the lowest social level and initially does not even have a proper name. His family calls him Munna, but later his schoolteacher names him Balram, while a government official assigns him a date of birth only to manipulate his vote in the future. His mother dies of tuberculosis before she can name him, and his father, a poor rickshaw puller, also dies of the same disease.

Balram is born into extreme poverty in a part of India that he describes as the “Darkness.” Despite being a bright student—nicknamed the “White Tiger,” a rare animal that appears only once in a generation—his birth circumstances seem to condemn him to a life of poverty in his village. The village is marked by unhygienic conditions, with sewage running through the streets and people living under the control of corrupt landlords. Balram describes this region as a place of severe hardship where powerful landlords dominate every aspect of life. Children are often forced to leave school and work as bonded laborers, and elections are manipulated through bribery and influence. In his village, four landlords control all essential resources. One must pay one landlord to cultivate land, another for grazing animals, a third for using the roads to earn money as a rickshaw puller, and the fourth for access to water and fishing. Balram’s family is forced to borrow money to pay his cousin’s dowry, which compels him to leave school and work in a teashop. However, fate offers him a chance for a better life when his grandmother arranges six hundred rupees for him to learn driving. When he goes in search of employment, he happens to be at the landlord’s house at the right time. The landlord’s youngest son, Ashok, has just returned from America and needs a driver. Balram is chosen for the job.

As a driver, Balram’s duties go beyond driving. He is also expected to cook, clean, and perform any task his master demands. When Ashok moves to Delhi, Balram accompanies him. During this time, he witnesses his master bribing politicians and influential people to protect the family business. Although Balram appears to be merely a silent driver, he observes everything. This experience marks the beginning of his gradual escape from the “Darkness” of poverty. Despite being uneducated, exploited, and coming from a deprived rural background—where nearly seventy percent of the country’s population lives—Balram possesses determination, intelligence, and ambition. When he arrives in Delhi with his master, the city opens his eyes to a world of wealth and opportunities. Driving through shopping malls and call centers, he becomes increasingly aware of the immense gap between the rich and the poor.

At first, the story appears to be a simple narrative, but Balram’s sharp and satirical observations reveal deeper social realities. He reflects that in ancient times India functioned like an orderly zoo where everyone had a fixed role according to caste and occupation. However, in modern India, he believes that there are only two castes: the rich and the poor—those with “big bellies” and those with “small bellies.” According to him, there are also only two destinies: either to eat or to be eaten. As the narrative progresses, the story becomes darker.

In contrast, Balram describes the condition of the poor by comparing them to chickens in a crowded market cage in Old Delhi. Even though the chickens witness others being slaughtered around them, they do not rebel or escape. Similarly, the poor people in society continue to endure exploitation and oppression without resistance. The narrative voice of Balram in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is compelling and engaging. His observations about society are sharp and insightful, often expressed with bitter humor and a sense of sadness. Through his narration, Balram reveals the harsh reality that the benefits of India’s impressive economic growth are not shared equally among its people. He describes Indian society as a system he calls the “Rooster Coop,” where millions of people are trapped in lives of poverty, illness, and suffering. His honest and direct description of this situation is both shocking and powerful.

Adiga portrays Balram as a strong and determined protagonist while also presenting an India filled with economic opportunities, social tensions, and class conflicts. The novel reflects the ongoing struggle between oppression and resistance. It highlights a central dilemma of modern India, where strong family loyalty and a long tradition of servitude clash with the ideals of democracy. The wealthy enjoy luxurious lives in a modern and prosperous environment, while servants are expected to obey their masters completely—even to the extent of accepting punishment or imprisonment for crimes committed by their employers. Through Balram’s experiences, Adiga illustrates the deep-rooted loyalty and submission of the servant class.

Balram explains this phenomenon through the idea of the “Rooster Coop.” In markets, hens and roosters are often kept crowded together in cages where they struggle just to breathe, yet they do not attempt to escape even when they see other birds being killed. According to Balram, the poor in India live in a similar situation. They are so busy competing and struggling against one another for survival that they never unite to challenge the system that traps them. Fear also plays an important role in maintaining this system. Servants know that if they oppose their masters, their families may face severe consequences. Balram recalls an incident from his village where a servant made a mistake and the landlord punished him by killing his entire family. Throughout the novel, Balram himself experiences humiliation and exploitation. On one occasion, his employer’s wife drives a car while intoxicated and accidentally kills a child. To protect themselves, the family forces Balram to sign a statement claiming that he was responsible for the accident, assuming that as a servant he would willingly go to prison in place of his wealthy employers.

Balram’s letters to the Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao resemble a confession, similar to that of a penitent speaking to a priest. However, unlike a traditional confession, Balram is not seeking forgiveness. Instead, he presents his own life story to reveal the harsh truths about Indian society. He argues that corruption and bribery are deeply embedded in the system and help sustain the country’s economic growth. Behind symbols of morality such as statues of Mahatma Gandhi and the grandeur of temples lies a reality where corruption is so widespread that it is accepted as a normal part of life. Ultimately, Adiga portrays India as a society that appears democratic but still retains many feudal characteristics.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga portrays Balram as someone who quickly learns how the corrupt system works and adapts himself to survive within it. He understands how to manipulate and influence people just like others who operate in positions of power. Balram is not presented as a social reformer who wants to transform society, although he dreams of establishing a school where poor children could receive proper education and become “White Tigers” themselves. In the harsh environment that Balram describes as a jungle-like India, compassion has little value; survival depends on being strong, cunning, and aggressive like a tiger. As Balram grows older, he begins to recognize the deep injustice of a system that forces people to choose between loyalty to their family and their own personal freedom, as well as between obedience to their masters and independence.

The story deals with familiar themes such as class and caste divisions, poverty, exploitation, and the struggle of individuals to overcome oppressive circumstances. Balram, both the narrator and the central character, describes himself as a self-taught entrepreneur whose life story shows how an imperfect and half-educated individual is shaped by society. Although he does not consider himself an original thinker, he believes he is a careful observer and listener. His journey begins when a school inspector recognizes his intelligence and calls him a “White Tiger,” a rare creature that appears only once in a generation. The inspector promises him a scholarship, but his education ends prematurely due to poverty.

Eventually, Balram becomes the driver of a wealthy man who takes him to Delhi. In the city, he witnesses the luxurious lifestyle of the rich while driving past shopping malls and call centers. At the same time, he realizes that someone like him will never be allowed to share in this prosperity. As he reflects on his situation, Balram comes to believe that the only way to enter this new world of wealth is by killing his master. In the novel’s first-person narrative, he openly confesses how he murdered his employer on a rainy day in Delhi and stole a bag containing a large amount of money. With this money, he starts a transportation business in Bangalore that serves workers in the technology industry. Like many successful businesses in the country, his enterprise also relies on bribing the police to operate smoothly.

Balam argues that only an extraordinary and ruthless individual—a true “White Tiger”—would dare to risk the lives of his family in order to steal the money his master carried for bribing politicians. In a dramatic conclusion, he explains how he uses the profits from this crime to transform himself into a successful entrepreneur in India’s growing economy. For him, the murder of his master becomes a way to claim his identity and dignity as a human being. His story therefore takes a dark and disturbing turn: he may appear to be an entrepreneur, but he is also a criminal who justifies his actions as necessary for survival. The world in which Balam operates is not only a rapidly developing economy but also a society deeply marked by corruption, inequality, and poverty.

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* does more than merely question the surface glamour of India’s economic growth; it reveals the corruption and inequality hidden beneath it. Balam constantly struggles to escape the limitations imposed on him. Near the end of the novel, while walking through the Delhi Zoo, Balam reflects, “The moment you recognize the beautiful in the world, you stop being a slave.” This insight reflects one of the novel’s central ideas: true awareness of beauty and possibility allows individuals to recognize injustice instead of silently accepting it. Adiga has explained that the inspiration for the novel came from conversations with servants and rickshaw pullers across India. He wanted to capture the authentic voice of ordinary people encountered in places such as railway stations and liquor shops.

Although *The White Tiger* is often presented as a realistic depiction of India, it sometimes appears surprisingly inauthentic, particularly in its portrayal of ordinary people, which can seem stereotypical and even offensive. For instance, the novel describes migrant workers from Bihar returning to their villages after months of labor in cities like Dhanbad, Delhi, and Calcutta. They come back thinner, darker, and more hardened, but with money in their pockets. The women in the village are shown eagerly waiting for them, rushing at them as soon as they arrive and struggling over the money they have brought. In the narrator’s account, his uncle manages to keep some of his earnings, while his father repeatedly loses everything. His father even remarks that although he survived the hardships of the city, he could not withstand the pressures of life at home. The narrative further suggests that the women feed the men only after feeding the buffalo, which reinforces a harsh and somewhat exaggerated image of rural life.

Such depictions make it seem as if the novelist does not fully understand the emotional depth, affection, and suffering of the people he portrays. The varied critical reactions to the novel reflect what Shashi Deshpande once remarked: being ignored is worse than receiving criticism because it feels as though one’s work has disappeared into nothingness; even a negative review is better than none.

Conclusion

In reality, economic inequality is not limited to India but exists across the world. As George Orwell famously wrote in *Animal Farm*, “All men are equal, but some are more equal than others.” Similarly, Thomas Carlyle observed that industrial England was divided into two groups—the wealthy and the poor. Writers like Charles Dickens portrayed the harsh realities of the urban poor, while William Makepeace Thackeray focused more on the lives of the upper classes. These social inequalities have historically led to major upheavals such as the French Revolution and the Bolshevik Revolution. The same idea is reflected in Oliver Goldsmith’s poem *The Traveler*, which suggests that wealth and power often allow the rich to control the law while the poor suffer under it.

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