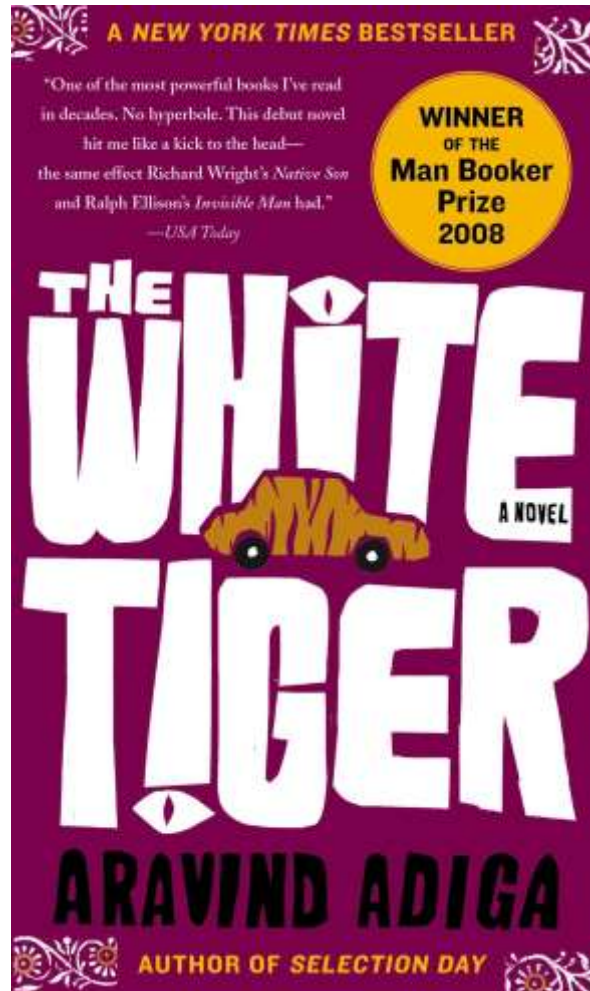


From Rags to Riches: An Existentialist Journey of Balram Halwai in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Nalini Saxena, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar



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Abstract

The present research paper is an attempt to study and analyze the existentialist journey of the Protagonist Balram from rags to riches in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Now the question is why his journey is existentialist and how this novel can be a part of Existentialism? What are the major themes or the point where existentialism exists in this novel? Existentialism is a 20th century movement flourishing after the Second World War, promoted by Jean-Paul-Sartre under the title 'fortitude' or "Courage to be".

It plays an important role to us know our own existence as individuals and to regain or change our lives according to our wishes. This research paper will focus on how different concepts of existentialism play an important role in Balram's life. How he manages to change his life from a poor small-town boy to a rich entrepreneur in Bangalore.

Keywords: Existentialism, *The White Tiger*, Alienation, Authenticity, Freedom of Choice, Individuality, Transcendence, Aravind Adiga.

Introduction

The White Tiger is the first and immensely successful novel of Indian English author Aravind Adiga. Published in the year 2008, it affirms its feat in the field of literature by achieving the 40th Man Booker prize in the same year. Other novels written by Adiga are *Between the Assassinations* (2008) and *The Last Man in the Tower* (2011). Aravind Adiga, 33 at the time, was the second youngest writer as well as the fourth debut writer to win the prize in 2008.

The story of the novel begins with its protagonist Balram Halwai's letter addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, in which he narrates his life's story from childhood to present time. Written in seven consecutive nights, Balram explains how he, the son of a rickshaw puller, broke out of a life of enslavement to become a successful businessman, describing himself as an entrepreneur. His journey starts from Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service.

Different Aspects of Existentialism in the Novel

Balram's journey commences with alienation and then moves on with his freedom of choice and responsibility, his transformation to search his own identity and finally ends by proofing his individuality as a normal human being. On this journey of Balram, we encounter, different concepts of existentialism like freedom of choice and responsibility, search for identity, facticity and transcendence, authenticity, alienation, individualism and Dasein. Among these concepts Individualism and freedom of choice and responsibility are the basic themes of the novel and they also promote existentialism in this novel.

Unique Story and Unique Hero

It is a novel with a remarkable, unique story of the successful existentialist hero and entrepreneur Balram Halwai, the protagonist. He is an existential hero because he wants to proof his existence and he himself is the maker of his life. As Sangeeta mentions, "He suffers from an endless existential crisis from which there is no escape." (Sangeeta 2015:2)

Aspect of Alienation

Balram's journey as an existential journey starts from the existentialist concept of freedom of choice and alienation which he had to face since his childhood. Hegel is the founder of the Theme of Alienation. He explains the different types of Alienation, like alienation from social systems like government, family, law and others, but mainly his focus was on the alienation of a human being from its consciousness of its own freedom. We can understand alienation through this definition:

Alienation, in social sciences, the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, products of work, or self, "encompassing such variants as "...powerlessness, the feeling that one's destiny is not under one's control, but is determined by external agents, fate, luck, or institutional arrangements, meaninglessness, a generalized sense of purposelessness in life... cultural estrangement, the sense of removal from established values in society, and ... self-estrangement, perhaps the most difficult to define, and in a sense the master theme, the understanding that in one way or another the individual is out of touch with himself. (*Encyclopedia Britannica*).

Balram's Life

The above definition of *alienation* explains that alienation is an innermost feeling of separation from society, ourselves, others, ideas and places. Balram belonged to a poor class and always saw his parents struggle for money. They did not have time even to take care of their children. Balram was not able to connect much with his parents and feels alienated. And he passes comments such as "now what kind of place is it where people forget to name their children?" (*The White Tiger*, 14). Later he was alienated from his own master, his own class and the corrupt people around him. Alienation, struggle for identity and behavior of big bellies had made him lose his identity in the hands of corrupt people.

The Role of Poverty

The basic reason for alienation here is poverty. After facing alienation from society and home Balram's story further revolves around his deep desire to come out from the dark side of life (poverty) and to achieve a life "full of light" (rich and successful). His journey from poverty to prosperity is the result of choices he makes in his life and his responsibility for them. Here, the concept of freedom of choice and responsibility begins.

Aspect of Freedom of Choice - Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy of freedom. It believes in the actuality that we can always have a come-back in our lives and reflect on what we have been doing. In this sense, we can always perform above our potential. But we are as responsible as we are free. It believes that human being is always free to choose because they exist as a human being (Dasein) first, and then their essence comes. Their essence includes whatever they are in their life. And as a human being they are free to choose whatever step they want to take in their lives and make changes in their lives. They are not bound with essence. Balram set an example that every individual has freedom of choice either to be the maker of one's life or to be the destroyer, in this extremely complex world. It's his choice to become The White Tiger of society by breaking the rooster coop of poverty. Because of his choice not to die like a slave, he transforms himself from a half-baked (poor) man into a successful entrepreneur. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow."

A Memoir of Balram's Journey

The novel is somewhat of a memoir of his journey to find his freedom in India's modern-day capitalist society. Towards the beginning of the novel, Balram cites a poem from the Muslim poet Iqbal where he talks about slaves and says "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." (*The White Tiger*, 25) Balram sees himself embodying the poem and being the one who sees the world and takes it as he rises through the ranks of society, and in doing so finding his freedom.

To break the shackles of slavery and to enjoy the freedom, he murders his master Ashok and takes his money to start his business. His master's murder is the point where the concept of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity are proved in this story. Murdering his master is a very important decision of Balram's life. His decision of not becoming a slave for life and to feel that light of success gives him a support to do this. "The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave, poet Iqbal". (*The White Tiger*, 273). The door of success is in front of him and he is just trying to enter the light of success in his life. To open this door, he forgets his concern about his master and murders him.

As Viktor comments in his work, "Man Search for Meaning":

Sometimes the situation in which a man finds himself may require him to shape his own fate by action. At other times it is more advantageous for him to make use of an opportunity for contemplation and to realize assets in this way. Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment. Yet one main feature of human existence is the capacity of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary. (131)

One may argue that Balram was not guilty of murdering his master. Fight for freedom and struggle for dreams shows Balram's individuality.

Aspect of Individuality

The opening three lines of the novel explain that he is maintaining his individuality from the beginning till his success as entrepreneur.

From the Desk of:
'The White Tiger'
A Thinking Man
and an entrepreneur (*The White Tiger*, 3)

Significance of the Title of the Novel

The novel's title *The White Tiger* shows that Balram Halwai is the only character of his society who maintains his individuality, like White Tiger is the only one in the jungle. As Balram's teacher said about him and give him a name White Tiger: In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals, the creature that comes along only once in a generation? 'The White Tiger' 'That's what you are, in *this* jungle.' (*The White Tiger*, 35). These three lines show his existentialist journey from a poor village boy to as an entrepreneur. His own attitude and his own choices are responsible to establish him as an entrepreneur. "He is referred to as "The White Tiger" which symbolizes power, freedom and individuality. He is the one who got out of the darkness (low caste) and found his way into the "light". *The White Tiger* s a book about the man's quest for freedom". (Narasiaman 2015:1)

Life in Rooster Coop

According to Balram poverty plays a big role in his life, bringing on his humiliation. For him, poor man is like a rooster and his poverty is like a coop. Just like in a small rooster coop, roosters have to struggle a lot to make existence possible, in the same way poverty is a rooster coop and poor people have

to struggle for their existence. Rooster coop is an important phrase used in the novel to show the poverty and the struggle of the poor man and the real situation of the servant class in India. Balram always chooses to use his freedom to choose his individuality, because he is very authentic towards himself and his life.

Aspect of Authenticity

Authenticity as a word shows that it is about being truly authentic towards life. It is a major concept of existentialism. As Thomas R. Flynn introduces in his work, “Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction.”

To be truly authentic is to have realized one’s individuality and vice versa. Both existential ‘individuality’ and ‘authenticity’ are achievement words. The person who avoids choice, who becomes a mere face in the crowd or a cog in the bureaucratic machine, has failed to become authentic. (74) The realization of our own individuality is authenticity. Balram realizes that from the beginning of his life he never wanted to be the common face in the crowd. He struggles to come out of the crowd to prove his individuality.

Search for Own Identity and Individuality

Balram’s choice to search for his own identity and individuality, explores concepts of individualism and search for identity in the novel. Individualism in existentialism gives importance to the subjectivity or individuality of an individual. Existentialism is known as an “individualistic” Philosophy. For the existentialist, being an individual in our mass society is an achievement rather than a starting point.

Whatever they are as a social member by birth or circumstances, but as individuals they have special traits, and they can change their lives according to their individual thoughts and beliefs. Respect of individuality is very much alive in the protagonist Balram. Although he was also a part of the poor class strata, son of a rickshaw puller, he always wanted to get out of that strata.

Search for identity is the basic cause of Balram’s journey. He wanted to change his identity from a slave to a normal human being. Like everyone craves for one’s identity, one’s existence in this world, the same way Balram Halwai has the same craving, and acts upon it. He attempts to get the life of a human being. ‘Finally, Balram is identified as a man - resembling any other man’. (Pratima 2015:204)

The destruction of his own identity as a slave led him to prove the existence by hook or crook. And to prove himself, he needs to transform. His transformation of life from the dark side to the light shows the concept of facticity and “Transcendence” of existentialism.

Aspect of Transcendence

Transcendence is actually an opportunity to ignore facticity of life although, that is always there and to move on according to individual goals and thoughts. Facticity ignores individuality, but transcendence gives us a chance to accept our individuality and to maintain it. Facticity is our situation in society by birth, such as our race and nationality. ‘Transcendence’ or our consciousness, gives us opportunity to think beyond these boundaries. Transcendence is like making our own consciousness to be the maker of our life. Balram’s facticity is that he is part of darkness, but he wants light and for that he wants to transform things in his life. He loves freedom. Freedom from his facticity. He doesn’t want to be savaged by darkness. As Prasant Jadhav says: “Balram is not ready to die as a servant, driver or with an identity as a

low born member of Halwai community. He hunts for the identity, he finds a way to be out of the cage to become *The White Tiger*". Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave. (Prasant 2014:41)

Conclusion

Finally, as an existential hero, Balram Halwai's journey from rags to riches contains many concepts of existentialism. His determination to see dreams, to follow them and finally to achieve them, proves that man can fight for his true existence, and what he wants to make of himself. He is the only maker of his life.

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Nalini Saxena

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

Manipal University, Jaipur

nalinisrivastava17@gmail.com

Address: A- 706, First Floor, BSNL office, Hari Marg, Malviya Nagar, Jaipur, Rajasthan. 302017.

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Nalini Saxena, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Research Scholar

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