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Dialectics of Darkness and Light: Deconstructing Ethical Ambivalence and Social Mobility Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* challenges the illusion of upward mobility in modern India, laying bare the contradictions of economic advancement within a system rooted in inequality and corruption. Through Balram Halwai's ethically complex journey from servant to entrepreneur, the novel offers a pointed critique of capitalism, entrenched power dynamics, and the moral compromises demanded for survival. This paper examines the symbolic use of light and darkness, the inversion of conventional success stories, and the precarious nature of individual agency in a rigidly divided society. In exposing the false promise of meritocracy, Adiga delivers a disquieting vision of contemporary India."

Keywords: *The White Tiger*, social mobility, capitalism, corruption, power dynamics, class struggle, agency, ethical ambivalence.

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* presents a scathing critique of India's embedded socio-economic hierarchies, tearing apart the myth of meritocratic mobility within a structurally unequal country. Through Balram Halwai's morally compromised journey, embedded within dialectics of servitude and self-determination, the novel questions capitalism's exploitive machinery, which makes ethical transgression a necessary wage for upward ascent. The subversive narrative structure of the novel, which is presented as a confession before a Chinese Premier, further emphasizes the performative aspect of success within a meritocratic order that values ruthlessness over goodness. In agreement with critics such as Kanishka Chowdhury, *The White Tiger* reconfigures the traditional paradigm of rags-to-riches within India's dystopian

landscape of neoliberalism, wherein social ascendancy is inevitably coupled with moral concession (Chowdhury 84). This paper presents a deconstructive reading of Adiga's novel, unspooling its ethical ambivalence, systemic suppressions, and paradoxical agency within a strict analytical gaze with the following arguments.

The Dialectics of Light and Darkness

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* skilfully crafts an elaborate tension between light and dark, as deep sociocultural and economic forces that support India's bifurcated society. Darkness, however, is more than an unlit void within Adiga's novel. Instead, it is an epistemological and existential chasm into which subaltern multitudes are cast, beset by institutionally cemented poverty, bondage, and systemic disempowerment. In contrast, light is freighted with associations of wealth, agency, and liberation, yet indiscriminate and often sullied by moral slide and ethical ambiguity. This complex dialect acts as a thematic rationale and an organizational refrain, underscoring Balram Halwai's personal journey from the suffocating nadir of Laxmangarh's poverty to what is supposedly luminous entrepreneurial prosperity in Bangalore.

Critic Priyamvada Gopal explains that *The White Tiger* "creates a world wherein darkness is neither a geographical nor a corporeal space, yet a psychological and ideological place, reaffirming hegemonic formations that prescribe economic immobility" (Gopal 121). Balram, who hails from such a darkness, is representative of the "other India," a world of poverty where generations of bondage are accepted and autonomous choice is an unaffordable extravagance. His move into the light, however, is not one of ethical integrity but of cold destruction of traditional morality. The epistolary structure, presented by a confession to the Chinese premier, reverses the traditional narrative of success by rendering the elevation of the protagonist a product of calculated violation and not meritocratic ascent.

All throughout the novel, Adiga uses chiaroscuro imagery to support this thematic opposition. The village of Laxmangarh is constantly referred to with that are essentially, if not literally, mortuary. Balram refers to it throughout the novel as a place where men "live like animals" (Adiga 21), surrounded by darkness, both literal and metaphorical. Delhi, however, is alive with manmade luminescence, a world where "men with bellies" navigate a world of political and economic manipulations behind a façade of apparent progress (Adiga 35). And yet, even

the light of the city is oppressive, clogging. Instead of enlightening, the city illuminates corruption, rather than virtue. According to Nandini Lal, "Delhi in *The White Tiger* is a paradoxical realm where light symbolizes exposure rather than enlightenment, serving as an indictment of the moral bankruptcy of its ruling class" (Lal 187).

Balram's self-image is transformed radically through his navigation of this paradox. His self-designation, given by a schoolteacher who sees his concealed brain, makes him a "white tiger," a precious anomaly among shadows, preordained to go beyond them (Adiga 30). This identification is foreshadowing his future breakage from the deterministic path of slavery, is foreshadowing his final transformation into a predator, who accepts amorality as his survival tactic. The light that Balram strives for, then, is not a transcendental purity of goodness, but a space where ethics of the lower class are turned upside down; for him, "only a man who is ready to see his family destroyed-who will say no to them when they go asking-can break out of the coop" (Adiga 275).

The deeper tragedy of Adiga's novel is that the move out of darkness into light is a move toward calculated amorality, and not toward ethical clarity. Critics Ulka Anjaria, for instance, argue that "Balram's move from darkness into light does not end with traditional self-actualization, however, but is a dark commentary on the ethical vacuum which supports capitalist shifts of status and class within post-liberalization India" (Anjaria 73). The novel is therefore not putting forward light as a redemptive principle so much as an unwholesome space upon which success is based on ethical decay, urging readers to call into question the easy optimism of neoliberal individualism.

Ethical Ambivalence and the Justification of Crime

Adiga's novel subverts traditional moral frameworks by constructing a protagonist who rises to economic and societal prominence with a premeditated murder. When Balram Halwai dispatches his employer Ashok, he does more than commit a personal crime- he commits a symbolically charged act of class war, an insurrectionary challenge against India's hierarchical socio-economic order. The novel therefore creates a profoundly uncomfortable moral universe in which traditional ethical polarities- good and evil, loyalty and treachery, crime and justice- are made impossible. Far from situating Balram's actions within an understandable moral paradigm, Adiga questions the possibility of ethical absolutism, leaving readers struggling with

the nuances of survival within a corrupt system that requires participation for advancement. In this sense, Balram is a paradigm of what philosopher Michel Foucault would call "the ethical subject," an individual whose morality is not governed by external moral codes of conduct, yet is fashioned within a particular socio-political context (Foucault 27). His crime is then a crime against Ashok, yet a calculated realignment within an overall capitalist order that values end over means. As critic Kanishka Chowdhury believes, "Balram's ethical ambivalence is representative of the postcolonial subaltern's inevitable confrontation with systemic violence; his killing of Ashok is less a betrayal on a personal level and is more an act of what Fanon outlines as a revolutionary violence needed to challenge dominating frameworks" (Chowdhury 54).

This moral ambivalence is compounded by Balram's own account, which is free of remorse or existential pain. He does not carry the archetypal guilt for a crime, but sees it instead as an act of strategic expediency. "I had to kill him," he asserts with unflinching confidence, presenting his act less as a moral transgression than an unavoidable move toward liberation (Adiga 237). This calculated refusal of remorse is consonant with Nietzsche's descriptions of Übermensch, a being who lives beyond traditional morality to create his own ethical vision (Nietzsche 114). In Balram's world, righteousness is a luxury enjoyed only by those who are living in the "light" of privilege, while for others living in darkness, survival is a function of radically overhauling ethical conventions.

The novel's presentation of crime as a vehicle for upward mobility is consonant with Marxists' denunciations of capitalist ethics. As Terry Eagleton argues, "In a world where the ruling class is above the law, criminality is going to be the subaltern's way of challenging hegemony" (Eagleton 92). Balram's crime is therefore not an individual act of desperation, then, so much as an inevitability of a system, a condemnation of a world that denies legal avenues of ascent to the marginalized. Adiga does not, however, sentimentalize Balram's success. Instead, he makes it a necessary, if deeply uncomfortable, by-product of India's economic inequities. The reader is left with a disturbing question: if only symptomatically moving beyond systemic oppression involves resorting to violence, is it possible to unqualifiedly condemn? Meenakshi Mukherjee is critical of *The White Tiger*, contending that it presents a dystopian vision of capitalist India, wherein morality is a conditional phenomenon, adjustable based on a perspective within society's socioeconomic hierarchy (Mukherjee 198). According to this interpretation, Balram's ethical ambiguity is not an exception but a symptom of a systemic rot

wherein corruption has seeped into all strata of society. His metamorphosis into a callous businessman is representative of capitalist prosperity based on moral compromises, complementing Adiga's criticism of myth of meritocracy.

The Rooster Coop: A Metaphor for Social Entrapment

Adiga's *The White Tiger* uses the searing metaphor of the "rooster coop" to encapsulate India's underclass entrapment and cyclical oppression, particularly that of India's relegated poor, who are destined for generations of subjugation. The metaphor of docile chickens quietly watching over their inevitable slaughter serves a powerful allegory for psychological conditioning and systemic coercion preventing India's lower classes from rising up against subjugation. In stark contrast with run-of-the-mill Marxist dialectics, which imply class struggle as an inexorable agent of social change, Adiga's is a far darker vision, a world in which economic coercion is internalized so deeply that it subliminally regulates itself. Far from actively resisting subjugation, India's lower classes unwittingly shore it up, guaranteeing a radically inequitable status quo.

Balram's account, which veers from mocking disdain to raw outrage, exposes mechanisms for entrapment. The poor are, he bemoans, still "invisible" to upper-class eyes, yet are simultaneously an essential part of that system's survival (Adiga 160). The rooster coop is emblematic, of course, of economic stratification, yet extends further into an epistemological critique of hegemonic processes of self-perpetuation. According to critic Ulka Anjaria, "the coop works simultaneously as a material and psychological device, wherein poor people are neither merely shackled by external coercion but are actively party to ongoing servitude through an inscribed fear of transgression" (Anjaria 87). This reading is an expression of Foucauldian theory of panoptic discipline, whereby subjects monitor themselves out of an omnipresent, internalized fear of punishment.

In addition, rooster coop is not merely an economic entrapment but an expression of a comprehensive moral economy that values loyalty, subordination, and fatalistic resignation. Balram, for all his intelligence and repressed rebelliousness, is at first unable to envision a world outside of his familial reality. His change is therefore not so much a material climb but an epistemic break, an existential acknowledgment that if you want to flee the coop, first you must escape its ideological grip. The murder of Ashok is not so much a literal severing of

master and servant relations as an allegorical assassination of psychological shackles that have held him back. As literary critic Kanishka Chowdhury argues, "Balram's moment of violence is less an expression of personal malevolence than an indictment of a system where radical rupture is the only available avenue for agency" (Chowdhury 63).

Nonetheless, Adiga does not represent Balram's flight as an unqualified victory; it is suffused, instead, with a deep moral ambiguity. The rooster coop is, after all, more than a jail, a building of societal solidarity. In breaking out, Balram essentially relinquishes all filial obligation, severing his relationship with his family and leaving them open to vengeance. This serves only to reinforce the novel's general argument that systemic oppression is not essentially economic, but is instead relational—that the very buildings which support the poor are ones which also make revolt an act of radical personal sacrifice. In the end, *The White Tiger* does not mythologize Balram's flight, but it discloses the hard mathematics of class ascent in a world where ethical imperatives are subordinated to survival's imperatives.

Capitalism and Corruption: The Cost of Success

Adiga's vision of capitalism throughout *The White Tiger* is necessarily entangled with moral corruption, holding a bleak vision of economic advancement compatible only with participation in corruption, exploitation, and violence. The novel explicitly deconstructs the neoliberal fantasy of meritocracy, revealing that economic advancement within India's capitalist economy is neither a function of innovation or hard work, but of calculated immorality. Balram's path, from domestic servant to self-proclaimed businessman, is exemplary of that uncomfortable truth, according to which acquiring wealth requires an essential corrupting of ethical principle.

Critic Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that *The White Tiger* offers a depiction of capitalism driven not by open competition but by a deeply rooted alliance of political and economic corruption, where success hinges on the ability to undermine—rather than work within—formal systems (Mukherjee 205). Balram's rise reflects this reality; his shift from obedient driver to ruthless entrepreneur is not a deviation but a natural outcome of a world that prizes deceit and punishes innocence.

Adiga's critique goes beyond personal misconduct, probing the wider moral consequences of capitalism. The novel confronts a disturbing question: can one achieve upward mobility

without compromising their ethics? As Balram's story makes clear, the answer is a resounding no. His pursuit of wealth demands that he cut moral ties, forsake his family, and ultimately commit murder. His concluding insight—that wealth must be seized, not earned—epitomizes Adiga's damning view of a system in which prosperity is inseparable from exploitation.

Terry Eagleton's assertion that "capitalism erodes ethical considerations by subordinating all human interactions to market logic" (Eagleton 116) finds strong resonance in *The White Tiger*. In the novel, even personal and familial relationships are reduced to economic transactions. Balram's choice to kill Ashok stems not from hatred, but from cold economic calculation; eliminating Ashok becomes a strategic necessity, just as capitalism systematically depends on the marginalization of the working class.

Servitude vs. Individuality: Breaking Free from Generational Slavery

One of the deep thematic examinations of *The White Tiger* is the tension between subjugation and individuality, specifically with regard to cross-generational oppression. Balram's journey from subservient servant to self-made businessman is more than a personal rebellion, a symbol of breaking free from a tradition of subjugation. His transformation is more than an economic move, it is an existential affirmation of self—a radical rebellion against a system that wants to turn people into mere tools for labour.

Adiga's description of bondage transcends economic subjugation to include a wider-scale psychological conditioning that makes rebellion unthinkable. The Halwai family, similar to many others in Laxmangarh, is caught in a pattern of life-long bondage, with hopes being smothered before even coming into being. Balram's father, too, for all his hopes for a better life, gives way to a life of bondage, his agency diluted by systemic barriers making rebellion a futile exercise. This deeply ingrained fatalism insures a continuation of an ingrained hierarchy wherein bondage is not simply tolerated but accepted as a fixed fate. Balram's rebellion against this destiny is therefore a radical break from the submissive acceptance which has been characteristic of his legacy. His refusal is not so much a claim of ambition, however, as a violent relinquishing of the ideology which supports the apparatus of oppression. As journalist and critic Priyamvada Gopal comments, "Balram's rebellion is not simply economic but epistemic—it represents a fundamental rupture in the way the subaltern perceives his own agency" (Gopal 133).

Nonetheless, Adiga does not represent this rebellion as an unalloyed victory. Balram's assertion of selfhood occurs at an unprecedented expense, which involves renouncing familial duty and moral obligation. His evolution into a businessman is no fulfilment of essential selfhood but an affirmation of self-interest that is identical with the callous individualism of the class he previously served. In abandoning slavery, Balram does not overcome oppression—he simply reproduces it differently.

In the end, *The White Tiger* is a deeply uncomfortable reflection on what it costs, within a world organized around systemic oppression, to be an individual. Balram's is a path not of freedom so much as of substitution—he does not upend the architecture of slavery so much as move outside it, leaving intact for others what he has escaped.

The City as a Symbol of Transformation

Delhi, the populous city which is central to Balram Halwai's development, is not only a geographic entity but also a transformative crucible—both a field of possibility and stage of moral decay. Aravind Adiga positions Delhi as a contradiction in terms, a city animated by the possibility of socio-economic mobility yet drowning in a decadent culture of corruption, insidious duplicitousness, and existential isolation. The city is prototypical of the neoliberal spirit, in which success is not grounded on meritocratic toil but on how much a person is able to negotiate an individual web of power, fraud, and amorality.

For Balram, Delhi is an escape from Laxmangarh's suffocating feudalism but of a sort which causes not self-realization but erosion of principles. Navigating his way about the urban labyrinth, he insidiously imbibes the city's ethos—a place where questions of morality are rendered secondary to the pragmatic imperatives of survival. Working for his first few days for Ashok as his chauffeur, Balram perceives Delhi as some universe of boundless possibility, some realm in which hard and fast class barriers are observable to be less strict than in the village. Yet this fantasy is systematically undermined by his observation of the ingrained mechanisms of exploitation on which the urban elite rely.

Critic Ulka Anjaria hypothesizes that *The White Tiger* offers an image of urban India as a dystopian counterpart to the pastoral idealism so commonly attributed to rural India and argues "the city, far from freeing its subjects, simply reorients the modalities of repression in insidious and psychologically internalized form" (Anjaria 94). Such an interpretation highlights the

unprecedented extent to which Delhi functions not only as a physical and figurative imprisonment but also one wherein economic mobility requires some form of moral capitulation. Widespread corruption starting with the police to corporate leaders renders ethical integrity not so much of an obstacle but rather a liability.

Sudden contrast between village life and urban desire illuminates further the sufferings of India's marginalized for whom moving to the city is both hope and venture perilous and uncertain. Oppression is overt and rigidly enshrined in feudal strictures in Laxmangarh but in Delhi of a far more pernicious sort—one waged by stealth of mobility's illusion and finally by insistent demand for complicity in systemic exploitation. As critic Kanishka Chowdhury explains it, "the movement from rural to urban space in *The White Tiger* does not mark liberation but a movement from one kind of subjugation to another—one in which servitude is not imposed by overt coercion but by economic and psychic entrapment" (Chowdhury 71). Thus, just as Delhi is where Balram rises to prominence, so too is it where his moral ruin is born. His evolution from naive servant to hard-hearted businessman is forever tied to his experience of urban life and illustrates Adiga's broader criticism of Indian economic liberalisation as a Faustian pact—one by which economic success is achievable but only by losing one's moral compass.

Power Dynamics: The Master-Servant Relationship

The intricate and ever-evolving master-servant relationship of *The White Tiger* is a keen commentary on how fragile power hierarchies are and how repressed volatility is foundational to regimes of oppression. At its core is the shifting relationship between Balram Halwai and his master, Ashok Sharma—a relationship initially framed as one of apparent loyalty but which transforms to become one of disillusionment, fury, and ultimately, betrayal. Balram, on his first few days of working, imbibes the ideology of servitude and views Ashok not just as an employer but a kind patriarch whose largesse is distinguished from traditional exploitative master stereotypes. Such perception is gradually destroyed when Balram slowly grows more conscious of inherent asymmetry of their relation. Rupture is not brought about by some single act of brutality but by gradual accumulation of consciousness of how servitude irrespective of whatever master's temperament is like dehumanizes in itself.

Priyamvada Gopal's observes, "The master-servant relationship in *The White Tiger* is not found in a context of mutual dependency, as is regularly possible to assert in classical feudal settings, but in an inevitably unstable setting in which servitude is preserved only by virtue of the servant's continued belief in his own powerlessness" (Gopal 138). Such an interpretation puts a particular emphasis on psychology of oppression, so that Balram's bowing to Ashok is not sustained by material coercion but by an internalized acceptance of submissiveness. But when Balram's experience of how mechanisms of power actually operate deepens further, his perception of Ashok also radically transforms. Not anymore viewing him to be some form of virtue incarnate, he begins to see the fundamental disposability of servitude embedded in an economic utilitarianism of human relations. Murder, not surprisingly, is not some act of sheer insurrection but is rather the consummation of a prolonged process of psychological emancipation—one in which Balram releases himself of ideological shackles of deference.

Kanishka Chowdhury insists that "Balram's betrayal of Ashok is less personal retribution than systemic determinacy—an act of agency in a world where agency is not granted but seized" (Chowdhury 79). Indeed, in representing for our eyes the master-servant relationship, Adiga's novel actually works to expose the vulnerability of hierarchy models, wherein repressed subjects, once conscious of their own agency, possess the possibility of untying those very mechanisms hitherto constraining them.

The Narrative as a Subversion of Traditional Success Stories

Adiga's *The White Tiger* is an inverse of the classical rags-to-riches narrative in contradiction to the rose-tinted triumphalist voice typically characterizing narratives of upward mobility. Unlike the ideal hero of classical success narratives, himself ascending by exertion of diligent toil and ethical perfection, Balram's is a career marked by amorality, exploitation, and cold-blooded murder. Not only does this reversal of fortune belie the classical fable of success but offers an incisive satire on today's popular capitalist mythos of neoliberalism.

The novel deliberately forswears economic mobility narratives' usual moralistic undertones and provides a hero in whom prosperity is grounded on violation not virtue. Balram, far from Dickens heroes of suffering overcome by strength and ethical clarity, learns early on that moral integrity is an obstacle to mobility not a facilitator and so quickly grasps that "the story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in scars he has left on his own flesh" (Adiga 27) in a

way which sums up this ethos and which exposes economic mobility within the status quo to require an absolute abnegation of ethical concerns.

Critic Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, "*The White Tiger* is a counter-narrative to the classical bildungsroman, wherein individual growth is not brought about through moral epiphany but by successive withdrawal from ethical constraints" (Mukherjee 212). As this interpretation indicates so strongly, it's clear how far Adiga disrupts classical models of success, presenting in their stead a universe in which movement is impossible without complicity in structural violence.

Further, Balram's character as an anti-hero and not a classical protagonist lies at the heart of the novel's thematic construct. His ascendance is not ideal but representative of a world where morality is an obstacle to success itself. Terry Eagleton's observation that "capitalism does not merely tolerate amorality—it actively incentivizes it" (Eagleton 123) has immediate relevance for *The White Tiger*, in which Balram's survival and eventual success are predicated on his unencumbered willingness to cross ethical boundaries.

Deconstructing the Indian Dream

The ideological construction of the "Indian Dream," an epithet which echoes its American counterpart in inspiration of self-powered prosperity by diligence and industry, is amongst the most contested narratives of the socio-economic life of contemporary India. Whilst neoliberal economic reforms have fostered unprecedented possibilities for entrepreneurial enterprise and career mobility, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* systematically deconstructs this myth by unearthing embedded rank hierarchies which lock out genuine social mobility for subjects born into economic poverty. Along the trajectory of Balram Halwai's life, the novel interrogates whether it is possible for an individual to realize success in a strongly stratified society through meritocratic principles or is necessarily locked to moral compromise, crime, and exploitation of systemic weak spots.

Adiga's confessional epistolary form not only situates Balram as an untrustworthy but painfully frank eyewitness to India's economic contradictions but also puts chief focus on the ethical challenges inherent to ascending the ladder of success. That the protagonist is ultimately converted from subordinated servant to putative entrepreneur challenges rags-to-riches tropes and forces the reader to consider by sheer begrudging discomfort the unpalatable fact of

systemic corruption and ethical violation often qualifying for social ascendance. Critics such as Chowdhury assert that *The White Tiger* "reconfigures the neoliberal rags-to-riches tale into an uneasy examination of those structural mechanisms that sustain inequality, compelling in turn to ponder the unpalatable question of whether true self-made success is possible within an inevitably unfair framework" (Chowdhury 84). Thus far from sanctioning Balram's entrepreneurial ascendance to greatness, the novel is itself a dystopian critique of a society commodifying success while also denying access to it to those on society's margins.

The Myth of Upward Mobility in a Highly Unequal Society

Centric to *The White Tiger* is a vituperative criticism of embedded economic and social norms disguising themselves as facilitators of mobility but actually fomenting generational immobility. The neoliberal consensus is that globalization and liberalization have eviscerated classical hierarchies and enabled individuals of Dalit origins to transcend their socio-economic constraints. Nevertheless, Adiga's narrative of Balram's career systematically drills holes in this fantasy and reveals how mobility is not at all a factor of drive and hard work but is an outcome of collusion within the very mechanism perpetuating structural injustices. Balram's lived reality in Laxmangarh, India's prototype of the great underbelly of poverty found in rural India, is jarringly contrasted with the shining face of prosperity presented by Delhi's ascending economic elite. The contrast between these locations brings to fore the illusion of an egalitarian economic order and how the pathways of ascendance are neither equally based nor morally neutral. Critics such as Ulka Anjaria claim that "*The White Tiger* unearths the violent undercurrents of economic liberalization, exposing how the romanticized narrative of meritocratic success is, in fact, a carefully curated myth that obfuscates the perdurable power asymmetries of Indian society" (Anjaria 107).

The murder of Ashok, a literal and figurative act of distancing himself from his past, is not liberation but an acknowledgment of unmerciful realities of mobility to positions of power dictating how individuals rise to the top. Adiga therefore calls to question the possibility of such a "self-made man," implying in a world wherein power is maintained by a hardened elite, rising to positions of power is not a manifestation of individual brilliance but a manifestation of selective ethical compromise in a particular direction.

Self-Made or System-Made? A Question of Agency

One of the most compelling questions raised in *The White Tiger* is whether Balram Halwai can truly be called a self-made man—or if his rise is just the outcome of a deeply flawed system that rewards transgression more than it does virtue. Aravind Adiga takes the familiar rags-to-riches story and turns it on its head, challenging the idea that hard work and perseverance alone can propel someone to success. Instead, the novel suggests that it's the very corruption and inequality built into the system that both enables and demands moral compromise from those trying to climb the ladder.

Balram certainly sees himself as exceptional. He refers to himself as a "white tiger," a rare and extraordinary creature who managed to break free from the cycle of poverty and servitude through sheer determination and cunning. But while he claims agency over his transformation, the novel subtly exposes the scaffolding of institutional corruption and social violence that made his ascent possible. As scholars Megha Anwer and Aniket Jaaware argue, Balram's journey is less about individual brilliance and more about his ability to navigate—and exploit—the rot at the heart of the system: "Balram's transformation is less a testament to individual ingenuity than a calculated negotiation with the perversions of a system that offers no ethical avenues for mobility" (Anwer and Jaaware 191).

This tension—between personal agency and systemic determinism—becomes even more pronounced once Balram becomes an entrepreneur in Bangalore. His success there is built on the same unethical tactics that once oppressed him: bribery, manipulation, and exploitation. Rather than escaping the system, he replicates its logic. He may be in a new role, but the rules of the game haven't changed. This raises a crucial paradox: can anyone truly be free in a society where power and opportunity are so unevenly distributed? Balram claims liberation, but his autonomy is deeply entangled with the very forces he believes he's escaped.

In this way, the novel resists any easy celebration of success. It challenges readers to think beyond conventional success stories and to question what kind of sacrifices—ethical, emotional, human—are required to "make it" in a world rigged in favour of the few.

Conclusion

In the end, *The White Tiger* operates as both a dark fable and a scathing critique of India's entrenched class divisions. It forces us to confront the contradictions within the country's aspirational narrative. Balram's rise—from an obedient servant to a wealthy business owner—

isn't framed as either heroic or villainous. Instead, it serves as a troubling reflection on what it means to escape poverty in a society where justice is scarce and the rules are made by those in power.

As critic Ulka Anjaria notes, Adiga embraces the in-between spaces of morality. Balram isn't simply a product of corruption—he is its beneficiary and its mirror. His journey compels readers to ask a difficult question: in a world so deeply fractured, is genuine reform even possible? Or is survival—and success—only attainable by bending the very rules that keep others trapped?

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