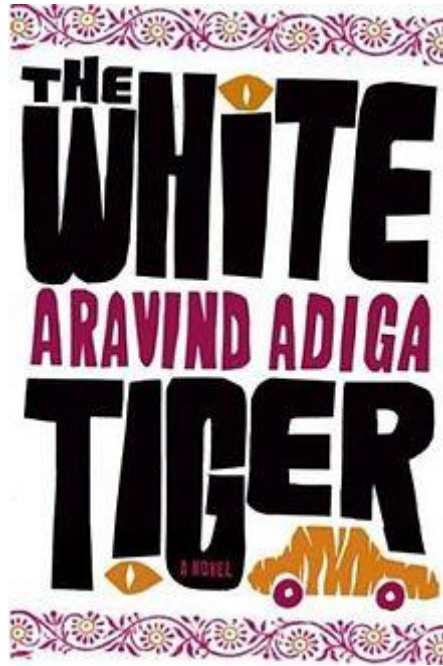


## Portrayal of Poverty and Corruption Ridden Postcolonial India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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### Abstract

Most of the Third World countries in Asia and Africa have been going through extreme poverty in their postcolonial age. The political freedom, which they achieved from the European invaders after their prolonged struggle, could not free them from the ultimate servitude. Though the caste discrimination in India almost got slightly diminished after the Independence, the struggle among social classes has become prominent to a great extent and the upper class society has been subjugating the middle and lower classes to suit their own needs. Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) explores the controversial issues of Indian poverty and corruption vividly in a setting of 1990s economically booming modern India. Adiga has shown how poverty has usurped the whole society where the poor people are deprived of the basic rights of free citizens, like education and health. They are exploited for the financial and political benefits of the upper class as well as by the government. Such exploitation leads the characters like Balram Halwai to

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indulge in betrayal, murder and adultery. This epistolary novel shows the hidden truth behind India's entrepreneurship through the protagonist who becomes a "self-made entrepreneur" after committing murder of his master and usurping his wealth. This paper will investigate the poverty and corruption in postcolonial India as shown by Adiga along with the social injustice upon the downtrodden people.

**Keywords:** postcolonial, poverty, corruption, globalization, *The White Tiger*, class struggle



Arvind Adiga

Courtesy: <https://alchetron.com/Aravind-Adiga-120426-W>

### **India as a Poor Country – Adiga's *The White Tiger***

Few days ago, India erupted over the Snapchat<sup>i</sup> CEO's remark on India as a poor country and the same hatred was faced by Aravind Adiga when he published *The White Tiger* (2008) focusing the poor Indians and the corrupted Indian politicians and entrepreneurs. The prestigious Booker Prize winner novelist Aravind Adiga is a Chennai-born Oxford educated fellow and his concern over the poor and the downtrodden of India is truly very insightful in the novel. Despite leading a luxurious life, Adiga has felt from his heart that India needs global attention to focus on the extreme suffering of the masses living under the poverty level without the benefits of health, sanitary system, food and education. Henry F. Carey, in his scholarly article "The Postcolonial State and the Protection of Human Rights" focuses on how the nations in Asia and Africa possess very poor records of protecting the human rights

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of their citizens in their postcolonial age. The writer broadly discusses that the existence of neo-imperialism<sup>ii</sup> and the economical domination which were created under the colonial rule, still control the postcolonial nations like India, by their own elite groups. Only the authority has been changed from the colonial masters to the upper class landlords and industrial magnates. Carey suggests that India and other developing countries should follow the way of liberal economic structure, not only theoretically, but also practically and they should get rid of their hatred against the western capital and investment. While discussing the postcolonial economical systems of India and Philippines, H. F. Carey remarks:

Repression is more or less as common as in India; both countries are marked by more than one third of the population remaining in poverty in part because of the continuous oligarchic economy, which independence has been unable to reform. It is not true, however, as postcolonial theory suggests, that former colonies are always marked by the continuous hatred of the outsiders or their local clients. Indeed, both the Philippines and India, the 'jewels' in the US and British empires, are today marked by their friendliness toward foreigners and foreign capital. (62)

### **Economic Systems in Postcolonial India**

Adiga's *The White Tiger* shows both the economic systems in postcolonial India: the oligarchic economy in 1960s to 1980s and the open economical market in the 1990s. At the beginning of the novel, the darker side of Indian society and the exploitation of human skill are shown through the protagonist's journey. The plot of *The White Tiger* revolves around Balram Halwai, the "self-made entrepreneur", who had once been a rickshaw puller's son. Rural India is shown to be dominated by oligarchic economy.

### **Balram Halwai, the Protagonist**

Balram Halwai, the protagonist and his family spend a deplorable life under the mercy of four landlords, ironically named after: The Raven, The Stork, The Buffalo, and The Wild Boar. When the novel starts, Balram is already an established entrepreneur who writes the account of his life sitting in his Bangalore office to send it to Premier Wen Jiabao, a Chinese official who wants to visit India to learn Indian entrepreneurship. The epistolary novel<sup>iii</sup> tells

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Balram's journey from the son of a rickshaw puller to an entrepreneur through several flashbacks. He was bright in school and was named as "The White Tiger" by the school inspector, but poverty forced him to leave his school. He was engaged in a tea shop near to Dhanbad by his grandmother Kusum and later he learns driving upon listening to the people that the job may secure his future. He gets recruited by the Stork to drive as the second driver of his family.

Perceiving the real world surrounding him and following the way of betrayal and corruption, Balram Halwai becomes a noted entrepreneur in Bangalore opening his own night taxi service named the "White Tiger Drivers" who are engaged to bring the nocturnal workers in the call centers safely home. Balram Halwai compares him with the noted entrepreneurs who are according to him, "made of half-baked clay". (11) The journey of Balram Halwai towards the entrepreneurship shows the uneven way of freedom from economic servitude to others. The life histories of the noted entrepreneur in the world tell the truth that entrepreneurs are self-made men, rather than academically educated. Life teaches better than any human teacher and someone like Balram Halwai who has an extraordinary sense to perceive life, can find their way out:

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you will find an old museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks...sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangle and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every teashop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, ...all these ideas, half-formed and half-digested and half correct...Entrepreneurs are made of half-baked clay. (Adiga 10-11)

### **Against the Western Notion of the Orient**

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a breakthrough against the western notion of the Orient which had always been portrayed as exotic, mysterious and an abode of spiritualism.

The postcolonial India appears in Adiga's novel neither exotic nor spiritual; it is an extremely

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materialistic world where people are devoid of morality, family affection and spiritual bonding. People are inspired only with the mantra of progression and they can cross any limit for their materialistic prosperity. After the pressure upon caste system in postcolonial India, people could hardly utilize their newly gained freedom; rather they followed the same path of their upper caste masters used to exploit others and use them as ladders for their own benefits.

In Adiga's novel, Balram Halwai is exploited in many ways by the Stork's family and he exploits the family and its reputation more than that he receives. Even Ashok, who is a modern educated liberal man, becomes victimised in Balram's hand. Unlike the portrayal of other Oriental writers, Adiga's India is not a place where the westerners come for spiritual wisdom. The impact of globalization has turned exotic India into a prospective country for investment for the westerners, who are coming to India to set up their own enterprises for the availability of cheap skilled labour in India. Even the very title does not suggest any exoticism; rather it is the symbol of rare strength and power. Indians possess a prolonged tradition of strong family bonding.

### **No Nostalgia for the Homeland**

The writings of diasporic authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, and Nitasha Kaul have shown how Indian people are nostalgic for their homeland and the people living in it. People migrated to other cities or abroad, whether it is politically enforced migration or voluntary migration, are still emotionally attached to their home and their relatives. But Adiga's protagonist Balram Halwai is a completely different man who is not seen to possess any affection for his root and his past. Even when his grandmother continuously urges him to send money to family, he ignores it completely. Balram only believes in sacrificing everything for the sake of progression. According to him, one should be free of the general conception regarding good vs. evil, justice vs. injustice for a better life. Balram does not believe in eternal justice, rather he thinks that one should prioritize personal freedom and happiness than morality. Only one's awareness and strong desire to free him from the all types of servitude can lead him towards a free world. He criticizes those who despite knowing tragedy do not move from the position:

The greatest thing to come out of this country... is the Rooster

Coop. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above.

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They see the organs of their brothers...They know they're next.  
Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.  
The very same thing is done with human beings in this country.  
(Adiga 34)

## Two Different Sides of India

Arbind Adiga's *The White Tiger* represents two different sides of India: one is the dark side where people have been suffering from extreme poverty, diseases, class struggle and illiteracy; and the other side is the glorious city life after the economical liberalisation in 1991. Balram's father dies of tuberculosis because of the poor treatment in the hospital and the corruption among the workers in the public fields. Despite being a bright student and having the rarest talent like the rare creature "the white tiger" Balram turns up to be the driver of the sons of the Stork. When Balram is engaged by the Stork as the second driver of the Stork's family, he observes the allied corruption between the village authority like the Stork and the government, the latter one is continuously bribed by the former one to run every type of illegal activities. The Stork family is involved in illegal coal mining and they bribe the local socialist leaders to run their business. When there is a change in the centre and the Stork's family is endangered, Ashok and his brother (the Mongoose) go to Delhi to bribe the central leaders along with Balram who drives them. Once Pinky Madam, Ashok's American wife accidentally kills a cycle rider, Balram is forced to confess that it is he, not Pinky madam who committed the crime. Though Balram is rescued by the Stork family from being legally harassed, Balram's intense hatred over the upper class rises to great heights. After the Mongoose leaves Delhi, Balram is trusted by Ashok in every family affair. Balram observes that honesty only brings servitude to others, whereas one can follow his success through betrayal and corruption. Balram murders Ashok once on the way, robs his money and escapes to Bangalore which is turning into the most glamorous economic zone in the economically liberal India.

The other side of India, as portrayed by Adiga is booming for getting linked with the global open market. Cities like Bangalore, Delhi and Gurgaon are representing a country which is truly shining. Under the then prime minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, the then Union Finance Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh announced the Economic Liberalization of India in the Union Budget in 1991. The process of liberalization was aimed at bringing Indian

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economy on to the doorstep of world economy through decreasing the government's intervention in the mode of license. Despite having several oppositions from and outside of the party, the then Prime Minister managed to convince all that the new reformatory act would solve the economic crisis in India. People like Balram Halwai are the mediators of India's transitional economy. Ana Cristina Mendes in "Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" writes:

The India of Light is that of wealth, technology and knowledge, while the India of Darkness (where the majority of Indians live) is that of misery, destitution and illiteracy. The novel describes how its protagonist/narrator Balram Halwai manages to claw his way into the Light of Delhi and Bangalore, out of the Darkness of Laxmangarh, a small remote village in the poor state of Bihar, in eastern India. (277)

### **The Impact of Globalization**

The impact of globalization resulted in vast economic growth of the country and India received the best ever foreign investments during this time. Being a house of skilled cheap labour, India became the target of the global outsourcing companies which employed thousands of Indian BPO workers in the outsourcing centers that mushroomed in the areas of Bangalore, Gurgaon and Noida. On the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India's economic liberalization, *the Firstpost* through an article of Rao and Kishore Kadam has brought out statistics to show the sudden rise of economy of India in 1991 due to vast foreign investment has been shown in the following lines:

Before 1991, foreign investment was negligible. The first year of reform saw a total foreign investment of only \$74 million. However, investments have steadily risen since then, except for occasional blips between 1997 and 2000. (*The Firstpost*, July 16, 2016)

Under the influence of globalization, Indian society turns out to be a fluid one the basis of economic, social and cultural exchange. In Adiga's novel the fluidity of transforming India can be explained through the "five scapes"<sup>iv</sup> as suggested by Arjuna Appadurai, noted **Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 17:5 May 2017 Sanjib Kr Biswas and Dr. Smriti Singh, M.A., Ph.D. Portrayal of Poverty and Corruption Ridden Postcolonial India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Indian diasporic anthropologist and economist and discussed by Ashley Hogan in his course blog. After the near demolishing of India's caste based social system, people from lower and lower middle class appeared in the position of entrepreneurs like Balram Halwai. Through "ethnoscapes," people of several communities migrate across cities and even borders to establish their own enterprises. The traditional job of Halwai community is making sweets, but Adiga's protagonist is seen to follow "ethnoscape" for a better future. Through the "technoscapes", the employees in Bangalore are sharing information and ideas through technology which is enabling people to cross the geographical boundary virtually for the sake of profession. "Finanscapes" is the way the open economy started to deal with the world economy after the economic liberalization. The benefits of "finanscapes" in an open economical system produced lots of entrepreneurs like Balram Halwai, who got established exploring the gaps in the system. "Mediascapes" works for Balram Halwai to perceive the happenings in the world through the newspaper cutting in the tea shop or the short bulletin in the FM radio. Balram gets to know from the newspaper that many people in Bangalore are nocturnal and they work night shifts in different outsourcing offices. This helps him to ideate his next move to run a taxi service for transporting the people working in the call centres safely at night. The role of media to form an imaginary world in a postcolonial society works for Balram Halwai to follow his own enterprise following the trends. "Ideascapes" enabled Balram to look at the world from a different perspective finding the way out from the ultimate servitude in a postcolonial society.

*The White Tiger* has subverted Hegel's master-slave dialectic and the novel has deconstructed the power-structure. According to Hegel, there is a mutual relationship between the master and the slave; both form a mutual relationship upon the consciousness of both the people. Benjamin Graves explains Hegel's theory in "The Master-Slave Dialectic: Hegel and Fanon"

According to Hegel, both master and slave "recognize" their own existence only in relation or "reconciliation" of the other. Among the many implications of the master-slave dialectic, then, is the idea of there being reciprocity or mutual dependence between master and slave rather than a blanket opposition of dominance to subordination. The slave ironically *shares* in the master's power because the master defines himself only in opposition to the slave; that is, the

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master *needs* the slave in order to legitimate his comparative privilege. (postcolonialweb.org)

### **Master and the Slave**

But Adiga's novel has subverted the structure where the consciousness of the master is perceived by the slave whereas the consciousness of the slave is never presumed by the master. Ashok, despite being the son of a corrupt landlord, trusts Balram wholeheartedly, but Balram sees it as the ladder of his progression. Balram knows how the upper caste/class Indians once exploited the lower class people like his forefathers under the colonial rule. Despite being born in a poor family, Balram has a strong sense of perception and he uses it to listen to others capturing the best to develop his status. According to him, people are still living their lives in misery as they have less or no desire to change their status. Only seeing the rotten things would not make any change, one has to accumulate the best from the rotten ones. "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world". (Adiga 34)

### **Centre and Marginality**

The relativity of the centre and marginality is also a concern in this novel. The post-structural analysis of the novel shows how the binary oppositions created on the basis of power structure are completely relative. Master/slave, occident/orient, good/evil, day/night are just easily breakable and reversible structures in Adiga's novel. The slave takes the position of master exploiting him and vice versa, occident comes to the orient for a mutual economic growth, good becomes obsolete in the abundance of corruption and India sets a new norm to work at night and sleep in the day with the White Tiger drivers and the call centre workers.

### **The Goal of the Portrayal**

Adiga's portrayal of poverty and corruption-ridden Indian society is not to mock the country's misery, but to pinpoint the situation of how the postcolonial India is still depriving the common people from their basic rights. India is "no longer at ease" even after the seven decades of Independence because a large portion of Indian population still lives below the poverty level without the basic facilities like healthcare, food and employment. On the other hand people like the Stork are abundant in the society, still dominating the economy through bribing government officials and depriving the common people. The prolonged injustice and

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exploitation provoke the common people like Balram Halwai to follow the way of crime to escape the servitude and live a better life. Balram Halwai is not born corrupt, but the society makes him evil. Balram is not ashamed of his conduct but is content, thinking that at least he could enjoy the life of a master. He expresses his pride to the Chinese official for being a contributor to India's economic growth. He forgets his family and his roots, but shows his nobility towards those children who are still being deprived of their rights. He plans to open a school for the poor children. Adiga thinks that it is the social responsibility of every author to pinpoint the evil sides of the society for the sake of reformation. While being interviewed by *the Guardian*, he mentions the name of Charles Dickens, Flaubert, and Balzac who worked for the betterment of the social and economic condition of England and France in the nineteenth century. Adiga thinks that the educated and sensible people's indifference towards the poverty and the corruption in Indian society are turning the condition of the nation into a more deplorable state. When Stuart Jeffries, the correspondent of the Guardian, UK, asked him how he had become interested in the poor and downtrodden people in India even after having lived a life physically detached from them, Adiga replies:

I don't think a novelist should just write about his own experiences. Yes, I am the son of a doctor, yes, I had a rigorous formal education, but for me the challenge of a novelist is to write about people who aren't anything like me...In somewhere like Bihar there will be no doctors in the hospital. In northern India politics is so corrupt that it makes a mockery of democracy. This is a country where the poor fear tuberculosis, which kills 1,000 Indians a day, but people like me - middle-class people with access to health services that are probably better than England's - don't fear it at all. (The Guardian, UK, 16 October 2008)

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### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> An America based social networking application.

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ii. “The policy or practice of a wealthy or powerful nation in extending its influence into a less developed one, especially in exploiting that nation's resources.” (Source: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Neo-imperialism>, retrieved on 23 April, 2017)

iii A novel in the form of letters written by the protagonist or few more characters. (Source: <https://www.britannica.com/art/epistolary-novel>, retrieved on 22 April, 2017)

iv Arjuna Appadurai is a globally acclaimed Indian diasporic American living anthropologist and economist who is famous for his theory of globalization. He suggests that five factors or “scapes” contribute to the global exchange of ideas and information in the era of globalization. The five scapes are: ethnoscape, technoscape, finanscape, mediascapes and ideoscapes. (Source: <https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/departments/courses/1011F/MUSI/MUSI-04-1011F/blog/node/229354>, retrieved on 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2017)

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