

# The Role of Casteism and Poverty in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger: As a Social Investigation

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## Abstract

This study explores Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a debut novel, which was published in 2008. *The White Tiger* is the story of Balram's confession to his murdering the master. This novel highlights the people who have enslaved their community for the ages through all the restrictions of society. Aravind Adiga has carved his name in the galaxy of modern Indian novelists, who won the Man Booker prize for *The White Tiger*. He is the second youngest writer to win the prize. He is the fourth Indian to receive the honor, after Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Rushdie. His writing style is essentially satirical and sarcastic. This novel reveals the difference between India's rise as a contemporary global economy and the character Balram, who comes from a crushing rural background. Balram is the strongest voice of poor people, especially the subalterns, unemployed youths, poor auto drivers, servants, prostitutes, beggars, and unprivileged figures. Within *The White Tiger*, Adiga explores the unhappy social realities, like poverty and hypocrisy, in India, largely through dark humour. The darkness of India signifies that Laxmangarh, a small village in Bihar, was presided over by feudal lords. It was hidden under the dark cover of corruption, inequality, greed, and the barbaric attitude of these lords. The novel provides a dark picture of India's class struggle in a globalised world. *The White Tiger* takes the readers to the heart of India and into the world of suspense. The novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption, and poverty in India.

**Keywords:** Enslavement, Rich and Poor, Caste and Religion, Sufferings, Struggles, Social Background.

## INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga was born on October 23, 1974 in Madras and was raised in Australia. He studied at Columbia and Oxford universities. He describes himself as a contemporary writer. He began his career as a financial journalist. He was a former correspondent in India for *Time* magazine; his articles have also appeared in publications such as *The Financial Times*, *The Independent* and the *Sunday Times*. He lives in Mumbai. *The White Tiger* is his first novel, published in 2008. This novel has been published in sixteen languages so far and has received excellent reviews for its dark humour and the issues it raises. Through this novel, two contrasting worlds exist within India; an India of

darkness and an India of light. The India of darkness represents Laxmangarh, a small village in Bihar that was presided over by feudal lords. It was hidden under the dark cover of corruption, inequality, greed, and the barbaric attitude of these lords.

*The White Tiger* is the story of a poor man called Balram Halwai. He was born in the remote village of Laxmangarh in Bihar, which is within the purview of Budh Gaya, the place where the great Gautam Buddha attained his enlightenment. "Lord Buddha sat under a tree and found his enlightenment and started Buddhism, which then spread to the whole world" (18). It reflects the journey of this young man from terrible poverty to becoming a

successful entrepreneur. Times and situations take a rapid change when he decides to move to New Delhi. In the novel, India is divided into two parts. In the eyes of Balram Halwai; India is both the richest and poorest country. Balram faces many struggles in his village, so he starts questioning various things during his stay there. At the end of the story, the question arises whether blood and murder function as the solution to success and whether loyalty and resilience are the things that need to be accounted for.

The White Tiger is an animal that is seen once in a generation, and this stands well for the character that is seen as a one-time wonder in his village. The term “white tiger” is derived from the fact that he was the smartest boy in the village. This was confirmed by the education inspector. Balram’s hardships and poverty forced him to search for a meaningful job outside his village in Bihar. He is a poor, innocent boy trying to start a taxi company. This taxi company was known as The White Tiger drivers. Overall, it is quite clear that people like Balram are seen rarely in a lifetime. The novel is centred on Balram Halwai, the son of a poor rickshaw puller, Vikram Halwai. He is the strongest voice of the underclass and unprivileged in that society. The underclass is the result of a corrupt Indian political and bureaucratic set-up. The victims of this corrupt system are called the underclass society, which constitutes “dark India”.

The story revolves around Balram Halwai. He is called The White Tiger in the novel. The story of the novel shows how the desire to become rich makes people corrupt and dehumanised through the physical, moral, existential, and material transformation of Balram Halwai from a poor, innocent person to a highly corrupt person. In this novel, Adiga reveals the impact of materialism on human beings in the age of globalization. He also shows that all the cultural forms depend on the socio-economic situation prevailing in a specific society. The protagonist of the novel, Balram, belongs to a lower-class family. In this novel, Adiga not only mentions the class’s discrimination but also shows casteism. Aravind Adiga has portrayed casteism in India as upper and lower class people experiencing acute suffering under the domination of the upper class people.

The storyteller, Balram Halwai, is the antagonist of the social norms and customs found in this novel. He is a substandard young man. Balram intensified his climb up to the pinnacle of Bangalore’s large dealings in counterfeit goods, deceiving and utilizing his delicate brainpower. The novel is a progression of dispatches in black and white over seven nights to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabo. Mr. Jiabo hovered over India to see the clandestine achievements of Indian entrepreneurs. So, the central character, Balram, assumes to let him know how to be triumphant to get power and influence among the people in post-colonial India.

Getting into the shady heart of India, Balram searches out an interval while he is appointed as a driver for his native wealthiest man. He rebelled against the modern contemporaneousness of sitting in front of the wheel of a Honda City car. It was nothing but a new rebellion. While his turning through the pages of assassinations of women by rapping or other ways, weekly exchanges for girls, having liquor, and consistencies in Rooster Coop existed in Indian society, he detects his master’s bribery at foreign ministries for tax robbery, and taking part at their own functions in the consideration of so-called Rooster Coop.

The poor, innocent Balram comes into this world in an underprivileged Indian remote area where improvement and social equality are still on the verge of extinction. He was born with a full belly of darkness and poor knowledge. There was not a presence of democracy but of prisons of corruption, dishonesty, bribery, disproportion, poverty, and so on. He became a child labourer to serve his family to make both ends meet. In his eyes, India, in his own village, is devoid of all fundamental rights where there is no proper treatment for the poor and the elections are openly put together with corruption and hush money. The immoral autocrats of landholders are tyrannical over the poor. He becomes an eavesdropper, which results in him being a simple driver as well as a faithful servant to his master. To him, India is a brutal land of injustice and sordid corruption, where the foes, the riches, are the white elephants.

This novel shows the real face of Indian society in a different manner. Balram’s journey from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad, Dhanbad to Delhi, and Delhi to Bangalore, tells us the difference between the lives of rural and urban, rich and

poor society. Adiga feels that in India, the disparity between the rich and poor is just a fact of life. At the beginning of the novel, the novelist presents the rural poverty and the deplorable condition of India's health and education systems. It is extreme poverty that creates darkness in the lives of rural as well as urban societies, and it perpetuates the suffering of the underclass and subaltern. The underclass and subaltern have no place in society; they are constantly denied their rights and are forced to suffer and remain silent.

Delhi is the capital and economic centre of India, where simple men are treated like animals, even though "man is a social animal" (Aristotle). It became clear when Balram was treated badly without a shoe while entering the shopping mall. A poor man with sandals on his legs is strictly prohibited from entering there. It is nothing but a cultural gap where the poor are deprived of many things. It has a difference in the economics of India, too, but Balram is an exception. He knew how to tackle that situation. He bought a white T-shirt and entered the mall. As long as he was there, he saw that everything was artificial, as if there was a chain covered around there.

The class system in India still prevails. India is a country that is known to be very cultural throughout the world. The culture is rooted deep in the country also, and it has various problems with casteism. A class system refers to discrimination based on the caste of a person. It is a great social evil. It is responsible for stopping a country's development. And it also causes oppression, which is very bad. Mostly, people living in rural areas are facing this problem. This practice was strictly followed in the old days, but it is time to be abolished completely. During the early periods, the villagers were separated on the basis of caste. They were made to live in separate colonies. Even the place for buying food or getting water was separated from those of the upper caste. The novel, *The White Tiger*, mainly focuses on the theme of casteism. In his novels, Aravind Adiga has portrayed the Indian caste system and the two classes in society, the upper and lower classes, in detail.

The protagonist of Adiga's novel is Balram, who belongs to a lower class family. In this novel, Adiga deals with not only for the class system but also shows the lower caste people undergo acute sufferings by the domination of

the upper class people. *The White Tiger* examines the typical Indian caste system and their lifestyle. For centuries, caste has dominated almost every aspect of Hindu religious and social life, in which each group occupies a specific place in this complex society. Rural communities have been arranged on the basis of castes. The upper and lower classes almost lived in separate colonies. The water wells were not shared. Brahmins would not accept food or drink from the Shudras. Actually, the lower class people were tortured by the upper class people and landlords. Adiga portrays the four landlords. They belonged to the upper class. They behaved like animals, so Adiga had given the animals' names to the four landlords. Stork, Wild Boar, Raven, and Buffalo are the four landlords. The narrator explained the four landlords and their qualities:

All four of the animals live in high-walled mansions just outside laxmangarh, the landlords' quarters. They had their own temples inside the mansions, and their own wells and ponds and did not need to come out into the village except to feed. Once upon a time, the children of the four animals went around town in their own cars; Kusum remembered those days (TWT 25).

Through these lines, Adiga clearly shows the theme of the class system. The four landlords belong to the upper class. As a result, they forced them to live in separate quarters. They never left the village except to feed because they had everything they needed in their quarters. They never mingled with the lower-class people in the village. Ankhi Mukherjee opines that caste comes to dominate over religion and sex in this novel, which is important too, as the debates around caste have become central to debates about corruption in India. Crucially, Adiga's novel may be complicit in reformulating the terms of class and caste to be interchangeable, but he succeeds in making the upper-caste criticism of caste-based reservations the lower caste's critique of class inequality.

In this novel, Adiga portrays how the lower class people suffered and were oppressed by the landlords and upper caste people. The lower classes had struggled in their daily lives. They were highly exploited by the landlords. Balram also suffered under the landlords. Through the character of the landlords, Adiga deals with the theme of "Casteism". Being born into an upper class family, they would treat the lower class

people as servants, not as human beings. The poor and lower-class people were highly exploited by the landlords. Though they belonged to the high caste, they suppressed the lower caste people.

Balram was born in a tiny village named Laxmangarh in Gaya district, Bihar. He was the son of a poor rickshaw puller, Vikram Halwai, who died of tuberculosis, and the grandson of a sweet-maker whose shop was usurped by a rich man. 'Rickshaws are not allowed inside the posh parts of Delhi, where foreigners might see them and gape (24). The writer draws our attention to the poor health service of Indian villages, which exacerbates the miseries of the poor people. There were no hospital facilities in Laxmangarh. Balram's father was seriously ill. Balram remembers his past memories,

[a]t the age of twenty-four, when I was living in Dhanbad and working in Mr. Ashok's service as a chauffeur, I returned to Laxmangarh when my master and his wife went there on an excursion. It was a very important trip for me, and one I hope to describe in greater detail when time permits. For now, all I want to tell you is this: While Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam were relaxing, having eaten lunch, I had nothing to do, so I decided to try again. I swam through the pond, walked up the hill, went into the doorway, and entered the Black Fort for the first time. There wasn't much around—just some broken walls and a bunch of frightened monkeys watching me from a distance. Putting my foot on the wall, I looked down on the village from there. My little Laxmangarh. I saw the temple tower, the market, the glistening line of sewage, the landlords' mansions—and my own house, with that dark little cloud outside—the water buffalo. It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth. (33)

Balram had to take his father to Dhanbad for treatment. They went to Dhanbad by boat across the river. The writer tells us about the poor condition of the charitable Lohia Universal Hospital at Dhanbad, which was built for the poor people of the villages. The building of that hospital was totally ramshackle. Doctors always remain absent, and patients have to wait a long time, and they have to bribe the peon to know, when the doctor will come. Sometimes the peon gives pain-killers to patients for relief from the pain.

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Rural people have to face a lot of problems, and unemployment is one of them. In this novel, the writer talks about the state of Bihar, where the workers have to go outside the state to earn money in the rainy season. The man returned from Dhanbad, Delhi, and Calcutta a month before the rains, leaner, darker, and angrier, but with money in his pockets. Like Kamala Markandaya, Aravind Adiga also deeply feels the anguish of the poor people of Indian villages. In her famous novel, *Nectar in a Sieve*, Kamala Markandaya delineates the extreme poverty of poor Indians. Likewise, Adiga also shows the deplorable condition of the underclass and differentiates between the rich and poor.

Adiga shows the life of poor people in Delhi and how they endured and what the issues they confronted were. Adiga depicts the rich as extremely wealthy in Delhi, living a lavish lifestyle. Then again, the poor are extremely poor; they were below the poverty line. Balram likewise endured a great deal in Delhi. At first, it was completely different for him, and afterward, he adjusted there. Balram lived in a driver's quarters in Delhi. There were numerous drivers living there, but Balram never blended with the different drivers. In enormous urban communities, there are so many helpless classes who come from rural India to urban areas for business, yet they can't get there. They need to rest on the streets and pathways. Poor people live like animals and also look like animals. Their disgusting appearance and messy garments show their neediness. They pick the food from the trash. They come to urban communities to look for the light, but they remain consistently in darkness.

At election time, the socialists couldn't care less about the poor people. The Socialists would satisfy the needs of the rich people. There was

no water in the taps, so the Communists had vowed to thoroughly take care of the government's assistance to the people. After the election, they never fulfilled their promise. In this way, individuals ask the government, "What do you do for the people?" The Socialists gave them cell phones only. Thus, people asked him if, in the event that a man was thirsty, he would be able to drink the cell phone. Every day, the ladies transport water from a long distance. So people suffered a lot from society. Nobody could make any move for that. The socialist government was powerless to help the poor. "The election shows that the poor will not be ignored. The Darkness will not be silent. There is no water in our taps and what do you people in Delhi give us? You give us mobile phones can a man drink a phone, when he is thirsty?" (TWT 269) Social discrimination was highly demonstrated by Adiga.

Adiga portrays the connection between the masters and workers. The masters never contemplated their workers and their families. They were dependably cash disapproved which is more narrow minded. They didn't have a compassionate mentality. All through the story, the storyteller, Balram, endured a great deal, being brought into the world by a lower class family. On account of his family circumstances, he ended his schooling and went to the gig. Balram needed to become an effective entrepreneur. Toward the end of the story, Balram becomes an effective entrepreneur. He was faithful to his lord in the first place. Balram had a lower position, and because he was destitute, the expert treated him brutally. This changed the brain of Balram to go out and kill his master and become an entrepreneur.

Balram also shines a light on the lives of drivers. He describes how the life of a driver is depressed. He is treated as a worker. Also, numerous drivers are going to jail to save their masters and cover their wrong deeds. He makes reference to the fact that the drivers are enamoured with the magazine called "Murder Weekly," which they read together, and that moves them to kill their master. Balram said that in his master-servant relationship, he saved his master, Mr. Ashok, when Pinky Madam left him. He attempts to reassure his master. But his desire to become rich and strong was so high that he decided to kill his master and steal his money.

Balram wants to start a new business with the stolen money. Once, he got the wonderful opportunity to kill his master on the barren road with a bottle of glass, and there was no one to observe the murder. He kidnaps the suitcase of money and escapes the spot effectively. Then he returned to Bangalore, where he began his own taxi service and became a fruitful business. In light of his wrongdoing business, Balram's entire family suffered. He had a fear that at any time he would be caught by the police, and he worried about it. And he always justified his murder. He never acknowledged it as a crime, because his master acted in a cruel manner, and he also responded.

Balram is a faithful servant. Pinky Madam was involved in an accident while driving under the influence of alcohol. Balram is compelled and persuaded to accept responsibility for the accident. The honest servant follows the words of his owner gladly. It is a pity and an irony that we are living in such a devilish society where the lives of poor people are taken to be the means of entertainment by the rich. In a hit-and-run road accident, Balram is asked to receive punishment in order to save Pinky Madam. They should be ready to sacrifice everything for the prospects of the rich. They do not raise their voice to be loyal servants and to get their daily bread.

## Conclusion

This concluding part shows that Aravind Adiga's, *The White Tiger*, deals with the dark aspects of Indian society for the underprivileged class systems of upper and lower class people. It elaborates on the themes of upper-class dominance and social inequality segregation as playing an important role in this novel. Most of the novel, lower class people suffered and were oppressed by the landlords and upper caste people. The lower classes had struggled in their daily lives. They were highly exploited by the landlords. Balram also suffered under the landlords. Adiga describes the importance of these two themes. He concentrated on the themes of the class system, which is prevalent in many parts of India. Because of class discrimination, the narrator has explained how the poor, innocent Balram overcomes the struggle of upper class domination.

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