

# Ethical Consequences of Economic Disparity in Aravind Adiga's 'The White Tiger'

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## ABSTRACT

In the Indian Constitution, it is enshrined that every person is equal irrespective of caste and religion. In spite of that, inequality has been reigning in rural areas especially in respect of Dalits. For this, the Government has been making every effort to bring awareness to the people about the concept of equality. Still, disparity has been predominant in the postcolonial knowledgeable society towards Dalits. As a result, to get away from it the downtrodden have been resorting to illegal ways to vindicate their existence. The present paper is an attempt to project the brutal injustices on Dalits that are still prevailing in India and the ethical consequences of Economic parity through Aravid Adiga's novel **The White Tiger**.

Balram Halwai, the protagonist, belongs to Dalit community with a poor background, struggles for survival to eke out his livelihood. His village Laxmangarh, in North India is in the hands of the four landlords of high caste. They have the upper hand in the village and treat the downtrodden with much discrimination. Anyhow, to make his living, Balram starts his career as a car driver to Ashok the son of one of the landlords in New Delhi. There he gets vexed with the agonizing barriers, the dominance of the rich and their attitude towards Dalits and impoverished. Notwithstanding the tyranny of his owner, he kills him, grabs his property, escapes to Bangalore and resumes his new life as an entrepreneur. Through the character of Balram, the writer expresses the physical and social exploitation and the different problems that affect the day-to-day lives of Dalits and the suppressed in India. As well, he drives home the point how the exploitation of the rich succumb to the victimized to involve in unlawful means for their survival.

**Keywords:** Inequality, Caste Discrimination, Rural Inequality, Economic Disparity, Ethical Consequences

## Introduction:

The contrasting lifestyles of the wealthy and underprivileged, socio-economic inequality is clearly visible in the modern Indian context. While luxurious people showcase residences, vehicles, international travel etc., the underprivileged grapple with basic necessities. This difference underscores the nation's persistent challenge - the gap between prosperity and poverty. The consequences of this disparity have been highlighted in the present paper through the novel **The White Tiger** by Aravind Adiga.

Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" has explored the repercussions of the vast economic disparity in India. The huge wealth gap breeds instability and leads the individuals to compromise morality for personal gain. The impoverished, driven by desperation, resort to almost anything to escape poverty, At

the same time, the affluent, detached from the struggles of the poor, become desensitized towards the poor. This story sheds light on the ethical consequences and inequality in society. A complex web of human choices and consequences is portrayed through the characters of Balaram, Ashok and others.

### **Balaram's Struggle: Navigating Morality Amidst Poverty and Wealth**

Balram, the central figure in Aravind Adiga's narrative, emerges from the grim backdrop of extreme poverty of a rural Indian village where there are "glistening lines of sewage" in the streets (Adiga 36). Through his job as a chauffeur to a rich man Ashok living in New Delhi, Balram is exposed both to extreme poverty and to fantastic wealth. Balram's unique perspective uncovers immorality in the servant class as well as the master class. He believes that immorality is justified at least somewhat by desperation as a result of poverty, This distinct viewpoint challenges conventional moral standards, suggesting that the harsh circumstances of destitution can drive individuals to rationalize morally questionable choices for survival. Balram's narrative thus highlights the complex interplay of morality, economic inequality, and the human experience. In the words of Dr. Anjali Verma, "Adiga has graphically portrayed the different images of India – India of light and India of dark. But his focus is on the later and he tries to give it a literary voice." (04).

During his visit to his village Balaram expresses intense frustration about his family's exploitation of his deceased father's meager earnings. He recounts the instances of a school teacher who steals the government provided essentials like food and uniforms meant for the village school children. . "The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money—he said he hadn't been paid his salary in six months. He was going to undertake a Gandhian protest to retrieve his missing wages...Yet he was terrified of losing his job, because though the pay of any government job in India is poor, the incidental advantages are numerous..." (Adiga 28). Balaram, who is in a desperate stage, understands the teacher's desperate condition. Balram's feelings about the rich are conflicted. His perspective as a servant to the wealthy engenders hatred for his masters, who are corrupt and arrogant.

Balram, through his role as a chauffeur for Ashok, closely witnesses the lifestyle of the rich. This includes their involvement in bribery of politicians and lavish spending on prostitutes. While the opulent masters reside in grand mansions with a legion of servants, the servants themselves endure cramped basement quarters teeming with cockroaches. The stark social disparity is exacerbated by the rich's profound disconnect from the plight of the poor, viewing them almost as subhuman. This callous perspective is exemplified when Balram, seeking privacy for a personal letter from his family, is casually dismissed by the Mongoose, Ashok's brother, asserting that Balram lacks any sense of privacy. This desensitization to personal boundaries perpetuates the exploitation of the less privileged by the wealthy. Balram's unique vantage point as a personal servant unveils the moral decay prevalent among the affluent. The stark contrast in living conditions, coupled with the dehumanization of the poor, serves as a poignant commentary on the pervasive social injustice that persists when the privileged remain oblivious to the humanity of those they exploit. Balram's societal position allows him to illuminate the ethical deficiencies embedded in the lives of the affluent, shedding light on the profound immorality that persists within the privileged class.

Balram's chauffeur role exposes him to Ashok's activities include paying off politicians and spending on prostitutes. The stark contrast in living conditions is evident as wealthy masters enjoy luxurious mansions, while servants endure cramped, cockroach-infested basements. The rich's detachment dehumanizes the poor, as seen when Balram's request to read his family's letter by himself, Mongoose.

His master's brother says "He won't mind [me reading his letter]. He has no sense of privacy" (Adiga 162). The rich's desensitization enables ongoing exploitation.

### **Balram's Perspective:**

Balram's role as a personal servant grants him insight into the moral corruption of the wealthy. This positioning allows him to unveil the immorality pervasive among the affluent, exposing the stark contrast between their lifestyles and the harsh realities faced by the rest of society. "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings Light to my country. Every place...near the ocean is well off. But [the Ganges] river brings darkness to India—the black river" (Adiga 12). The metaphor vividly illustrates the contrast between poverty and wealth. It serves as a powerful symbol, emphasizing the extreme disparity and inequality that exists between the two socioeconomic conditions, portraying the vast and dramatic differences in living standards, opportunities, and overall quality of life.

Balram aspires to a life of riches, shedding light on the yearning of servants for an escape from poverty, a pursuit often elusive. Fueled by desperation, he resorts to deceit, siphoning gas, manipulating mechanics, and even transforming the master's car into a secret taxi. This narrative exposes the immorality prevalent at both ends of the social spectrum. Balram's colloquial, first-person storytelling style enhances reader engagement, creating a sense of personal connection. Despite being presented as letters to the Chinese Premier, Balram's personal account humanizes the immoral choices of the rich and poor, attributing them to societal wealth disparities rather than inherent human wickedness.

### **Narratives of Deception:**

In the work Balram satirically narrates instances of immorality, including a cynical portrayal of voting fraud. He highlights the deceptive practices involved in the electoral process, shedding light on the corruption within. His narrative captures the absurdity of the situation, revealing a distorted reality where dishonesty prevails in the pursuit of power. Balram's satirical accounts serve as a critical lens, exposing the moral decay embedded in the systems he encounters. Through his storytelling, he critiques the ethical shortcomings inherent in the portrayal of voting fraud: "Balram is a vanished man, a fugitive, someone whose whereabouts are unknown to the police, right? Ha! The police know exactly where to find me. They will find me dutifully voting on election day at the voting booth...I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth" (Adiga 86).

A teacher told Balram "The white tiger. That's what you are in this jungle" (Adiga 30). Balram himself is represented by a white tiger. The white tiger symbolizes rarity, mirroring the exceptional nature of Balram, who, like the elusive animal, escapes the shackles of poverty through unconventional means. Balram's ascent involves resorting to murder, reflecting the harsh reality that breaking free from the perpetual cycle of destitution demands morally questionable actions. The impoverished in India are likened to roosters in a coop, trapped in poverty despite yearning for a better life. The metaphor underscores how societal constraints and ethical compromises are barriers to their upward mobility. Balram's journey exposes the moral dilemmas inherent in escaping the coop, shedding light on the complex dynamics of poverty and societal expectations. Balram says, "Can a man a man break out of the coop? What if one day, for instance, a driver took his employer's money and ran...Only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed—hunted, beaten...can break out of the coop" (Adiga 150).

Balram gives many satirical accounts of immorality he encounters. Describing voting fraud: “Balram is a vanished man, a fugitive, someone whose whereabouts are unknown to the police, right? Ha! The police know exactly where to find me. They will find me dutifully voting on election day at the voting booth...I am India’s most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth” (Adiga 86).

Balram mocks the rich for their extravagance and corruption, but also mocks his fellow members of the servant class for their own cruelty. When Balram goes home to visit his family, they chastise him for not sending enough money home. Balram says sarcastically, “For the first time I can remember, I got more attention than the water buffalo” (Adiga 72).

### **Morality amidst Desperation**

Balram emphasizes how much he relies on a smiley face to cope and to navigate the impact of the rich's immoral decisions on his life and grapple with his own unethical choices, Balram secured his chauffeur job with Mr. Ashok by exposing the true identity of Ram Persad, who had pretended to be Hindu to secure employment. Despite feeling remorse, Balram, driven by desperation, prioritized the job over ethical considerations. When mocked by Mr. Ashok and his wife for his faith, Balram employed dark humour, exaggerating his religious devotion as a coping mechanism.

### **Exploring Social Realities and Challenges**

In "The White Tiger," both the rich and the poor are compared to animals, succumbing to immoral decisions fueled by desensitization or desperation. Balram identifies corrupt landlords as the Raven, Wild Boar, Buffalo, and Stork, highlighting their predatory behavior. Despite his awareness, Balram, leading a poverty life and perpetual desperation, struggles to lead a humane life. This realization emphasizes the widespread influence of unethical choices across societal tiers, exposing a common battle for humanity amidst circumstances that compel both the affluent and impoverished to compromise their moral integrity. The narrative underscores the universal impact of systemic challenges on individuals' ethical compass. Balram says “Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence” (Adiga 237).

Despite engaging in corruption and establishing his company through immoral means, Balram sought to make amends for a tragic accident. He offered the victim's family financial compensation and provided a job for their older son at his company, demonstrating a sense of responsibility and a desire to rectify the consequences of his actions. Balram also says, “Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. I don’t treat them like servants—I don’t slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don’t insult any of them by calling them my ‘family,’ either. They’re my employees, I’m their boss, that’s all” (Adiga 259).

The ending of the story is not a flawless happy ending, but it carries a sense of hope. Balram successfully escapes poverty without losing his connection to his roots, avoiding desensitization. This connection enables him to uphold morality more frequently. Despite his ascent, Balram remains mindful of his origins, contributing to a more optimistic outlook on his journey and suggesting that personal growth can coexist with a continued sense of ethical responsibility. He says, “Now, despite my amazing success story, I don’t want to lose contact with the places where I got my real education in life” (Adiga 259).

Balram highlights the contrast between the rich and poor, asserting that poverty leaves individuals with no choice but to embrace immorality. He compares the moral flexibility in Bangalore to the limited

options in Laxmangarh, suggesting the potential for improvement. The novel's conclusion underscores Balram's acceptance of his past actions as a desperate response to the dehumanizing servitude he sought to escape. . Balram says “I’ll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master’s throat...It was worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant” (Adiga 276).

Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" serves as a darkly humorous critique of contemporary India, revealing how extreme wealth disparity prompts both rich and poor individuals to make morally questionable choices. While the novel sheds light on the challenges and aspirations of the underprivileged, it concludes on a hopeful note as the protagonist, Balram, escapes poverty and gains the ability to make more ethical decisions. Adiga's portrayal of social issues is both realistic and vibrant, challenging the entrenched class system and exposing the flaws within Indian society and politics.

“The White Tiger” explores the life of Balram Halwai. It depicts his journey through human emotions, ambitions, and desires that lead to actions, including crime and murder. Adiga presents a critical viewpoint of India's social setup, highlighting social oppression, domination, and the challenges faced by individuals with limited resources. He suggests that in post-colonial India, the major problems lie in the stark comparison between social classes and the rural-urban divide. Through Balram, Adiga discloses the harsh reality of low wages and slavish existence for informal domestic workers in India. He exposes the exploitation, lack of opportunities, and the vulnerability of these individuals, emphasizing the social divide. Balram, however, becomes an exception, challenging the system through cunning means. Adiga illustrates the exploitation of the underprivileged by the rich, law enforcers, and lawmakers, showcasing the systemic abuse of socially deprived individuals.

The novel critiques India's culture, traditions, and societal practices, emphasizing issues like class and caste disparity, poverty, political corruption, and superstition. Adiga portrays Balram's unconventional path to success, breaking free from the constraints of his social class. The rise of the Indian economy in the late '90s and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the affluent are explored, highlighting the exploitation of financially downtrodden individuals.

Adiga contrasts "That India" (rural) and "This India" (urban), pointing out the socio-economic disparities and the impact of globalization. Balram's criminal actions, though condemned, represent the aspirations of those seeking a better life in a society where opportunities are limited. The narrative underscores the moral downfall of Indian society amidst liberalization, shedding light on the complexities of class and caste struggle, corruption, and the pursuit of wealth.

The novel adeptly navigates the post-liberalization era in India, shedding light on the pervasive corruption that becomes the backdrop for Balram Halwai's ascent from darkness to entrepreneurial success. However, the narrative doesn't merely celebrate his triumph; it also highlights the price he pays—entanglement in the very corrupt system he sought to escape. Balram's transformation into an entrepreneur reflects the shifting dynamics of class and caste in a changing India. While he breaks free from traditional social constraints, his success is a double-edged sword, tying him to the corruption endemic in the system. The juxtaposition of the old system, represented by his family, with the new system he enters emphasizes the complex interplay of societal forces. The term "White Tiger" becomes symbolic of Balram's exceptional journey, representing the rarity of individuals who, against the odds, manage to escape the metaphorical rooster coop. Adiga skillfully delves into the lives of the underprivileged, revealing the complexities of the master-servant relationship.



**Conclusion:**

Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger" encapsulates the harsh reality of the suppression faced by individuals like Balram, a Dalit, in post-liberalization India. The novel brilliantly unfolds the narrative of unlawful means adopted for survival in a system marked by corruption and social oppression. Balram's ascent from darkness to entrepreneurial success symbolizes the rare triumph of those who break free from societal constraints. The title captures the essence of the novel, emphasizing how systemic suppression pushes marginalized individuals to resort to unconventional and often unlawful paths as a desperate means for survival in a society marred by inequality.

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