

# Rising Against the Odds: A Critical Exploration of Oppression and Resistance in Aravind Adiga's the White Tiger

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## Abstract

This study aims to analyze the interplay between oppression and resistance as depicted in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, focusing on the tools through which inequality shapes individual agency. By critically examining Balram's transformation, the ethical dilemmas he encounters, and the broader implications of his actions, this paper seeks to uncover the ways in which Adiga's work serves as both a critique of entrenched hierarchies and an assertion of radical self-liberation. Through a detailed examination of themes, narrative techniques, and socio-political commentary, this study will provide a nuanced understanding of *The White Tiger* and its significance in discussions of oppression and resistance. The novel offers a profound examination of class struggle and economic disparity in contemporary India, making it an insightful text for Marxist analysis. Through the journey of Balram Halwai, Adiga unveils the entrenched inequalities that separate the elite from the working class, shedding light on the exploitation, systemic corruption, and the resilience of those who seek to break free from oppression.

**Keywords:** Marxism, oppression, exploitation, resistance

Aravind Adiga is an acclaimed Indian writer and journalist, best known for his debut novel *The White Tiger*, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2008. He is the fourth Indian-born author to win the Booker Prize, after Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai. He is celebrated for his storytelling and for challenging established norms in Indian literature. He is recognized as a leading voice among a new generation of Indian authors who explore the complexities of contemporary Indian society. He was born in Madras (now Chennai), Tamil Nadu, India. He attended Canara High School and St. Aloysius College in Mangaluru. After moving to Sydney, Australia, he studied at James Ruse Agricultural High School. He graduated as salutatorian from Columbia University in New York, majoring in English literature, and later studied at Magdalen College, Oxford. Adiga began his career as an intern at the Financial Times and contributed to publications such as *Money* and *Time* magazines. He served as the South Asia correspondent for *Time* before becoming a freelance writer in Mumbai. *The White Tiger* (2008) is Adiga's debut novel, a darkly humorous and critical look at India's class struggle, corruption, and poverty, told through the eyes of Balram Halwai, a village boy. The novel won the 2008 Booker Prize

and was later adapted into a Netflix film. Other notable works include: *Between the Assassinations* (2008), *Last Man in Tower* (2011), *Selection Day* (2016), and *Amnesty* (2020). Adiga's writing is noted for his sharp social commentary on the rapidly changing landscape of modern India. His novels encompass the themes such as globalization, caste, social injustice, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. His works have contributed significantly to postcolonial literature, offering a mirror to Indian society's ambitions, challenges, and transformations. He remains a prominent figure in both Indian and global literary circles, known for his insightful and unwavering portrayals of contemporary India.

*The White Tiger* follows the journey of Balram Halwai, a poor villager who rises to become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. The novel is framed as a letter Balram writes to the Chinese Premier, recounting his life story and offering insights into India's social and economic realities. Born into poverty in the village of Laxmangarh, Balram is forced to leave school and work in a tea shop. Determined to escape his circumstances, he learns to drive and secures a job as a chauffeur for Ashok, the son of a wealthy landlord. As Balram serves Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam, he becomes increasingly aware of the corruption and exploitation that define India's class system. When Pinky accidentally kills a child in a hit-and-run, Balram is pressured to take the blame, reinforcing his status as a disposable servant. Over time, Balram grows resentful of his servitude and the oppressive system that keeps him trapped. In a desperate bid for freedom, he murders Ashok, steals his money, and flees to Bangalore, where he reinvents himself as a businessman. Adiga in his interview with *The Guardian* talks about his success of his debut novel, saying

You can never please the people who like *The White Tiger*. It was written in a certain way, at a certain time, and I don't want to do that again. I asked myself where I would go from there; how could I keep growing as a writer? I'm very grateful I won because it's kept me alive as a writer - its tough surviving as a writer of fiction in India – but it has been a challenge to escape from *The White Tiger*. (1)

Marxism is a socio-political and economic theory developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It has an impact on various fields such as sociology, cultural studies, criminology, philosophy and literary theory. It views history as a series of struggles between different social classes, primarily the bourgeoisie (ruling class) and the proletariat (working class). At its core, Marxism argues that material conditions and economic structures shape societies, influencing their politics, culture, and social relationships. According to Marxist thought, history progresses through various economic stages, from primitive communism to feudalism, capitalism, and ultimately socialism, leading to a classless society. One of its key ideas is historical materialism, which asserts that economic factors drive historical change rather than abstract ideas or individual actions. Marxism critiques capitalism as a system that concentrates wealth among the elite while exploiting workers, keeping them in a cycle of oppression. It also introduces the concept of false consciousness, where the working class remains unaware of its own exploitation, preventing revolution. It is an approach to study history through class struggle and economic systems, has influenced scholars analyzing labor movements, colonialism, and revolutions. While some historians praise Marxism for its sharp critique of inequality, others argue that its deterministic view of history oversimplifies complex societal developments. Its legacy remains significant in academic, political, and social discussions, shaping ideas about justice, economic systems, and historical progress. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, M.H. Abrams defines Marxism as, Marxist criticism grounds.... especially on the following claims: Historical changes in the fundamental mode of material production effect changes in the class structure of a society, establishing in each era

dominant and subordinate classes that engage in a struggle for economic, political, and social advantage....In any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant economic and social class. (147 -148)

Karl Marx ideas aimed at creating a new socialist society by revolution. Peter Worsley in his book *Marx and Marxism* says, "Yet in his own lifetime, Marx's ideas had little impact. Only after his death did the Western explicitly 'Marxist' mass party come into existence, in Germany" (2). During 1960s, i.e. World War period, Marxism underwent great changes. Important attempts were made to develop Marxist thought by two theorists: Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the word Oppression as "a situation in which people are governed in an unfair and cruel way and prevented from having opportunities and freedom". The Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines it as "cruel and unfair treatment of people, especially by not giving them the same freedom, rights, etc. as other people". It can be occurred based on age, class, gender and race. The state of being oppressed may cause anger, depression, frustration etc...

There are many ways Balram and his family have been oppressed by the powerful. Vikram Halwai, father of Balram is a "man of honour and courage" (Adiga 23). Since he is treated "like a donkey" (Adiga 30), he wants at least his son to "live like a man" (Adiga 30). He is not allowed to sit in public chair as he belongs to a low caste and working class. Like other rickshaw pullers, he also died of Tuberculosis, coughing all the time. Due to father's death, he cannot continue his studies and has to work in teashop. Iqra Shagufta in his article titled "Class Stratification in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" says, "Balram belongs to the proletariat. His education, his aspirations and his quest for learning are succumbed because of the oppression and exploitation of the capitalist class. He spends the early years of his life in utter poverty and misery" (Adiga 1). Adiga also shows how poor are treated like dogs and dogs are treated like humans in cities.

The rich expect their dogs to be treated like human, you see-they expect their dogs to be pampered, and walked, and petted, and even washed! And guess who had to do the washing? I got down on my knees...washing them down, and taking a blow dryer and drying their skin. Then I took them around the compound on a chain while the king of Nepal sat in a corner and shouted, 'Don't pull the chain so hard! They're worth more than you are!' (Adiga 78)

Many people, in the village, are oppressed because of their caste. It is deeply rooted in their way of life. When Balram reveals that he belongs to a lower caste, the old driver rejects to teach driving. He adds that driving is only for tough (rich) people and says, "That's what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?" (Adiga 56). In order to reveals his caste, Balram says that he is of bottom caste and do not drink. So, he is given a separate room in the servant's apartment.

Aravind Adiga introduces the Rooster Coop as a powerful metaphor for the oppression of India's poor. Balram Halwai, the novel's protagonist, describes the Rooster Coop as a system in which the lower classes remain trapped in servitude, much like chickens in a coop who watch their fellow roosters being slaughtered but do not attempt to escape. "Rooster Coop is a place where hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters are stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages; frightened of impending death from the young butcher...Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop" (Adiga 174). If anyone tries to break out of the coop, he/she should be ready to face the harms given by the rich. Balram decides to get out of the coop, so he waits for the way to come out of the servitude. This metaphor highlights how societal structures, particularly economic and familial obligations, prevent the poor from breaking free from their circumstances. Balram argues that the Rooster Coop is guarded from the inside, meaning

that the oppressed themselves reinforce their own subjugation. Servants remain loyal to their masters, fearing that any rebellion would lead to severe consequences for their families. This system ensures that the wealthy maintain control while the poor remain submissive, unable to challenge the status quo. Balram's eventual escape from the Rooster Coop-through crime and deception-symbolizes his rejection of this oppressive system and his determination to carve out a new identity. The Rooster Coop concept is central to the novel's critique of class inequality, corruption, and systemic oppression.

Exploitation is one of the central themes in *The White Tiger* where Adiga exposes the harsh realities faced by the downtrodden in Indian society, depicting how poverty, caste, and class hierarchies enable the powerful to exploit the vulnerable. Exploitation is one of the major forms of oppression. The word 'exploit' means 'use someone (labour) for profit'. Through the character of Balram, Adiga illustrates the psychological and economic abuse inflicted by the wealthy elite, who not only control their servants materially but also dehumanize them for their own amusement. For example, Balram is forced to perform humiliating tasks and even coerced into falsely confessing to a crime committed by his employer's wife, highlighting the master-servant dynamic rooted in systemic injustice. His narrative is a critique of the deeply entrenched social structures that perpetuate inequality, revealing how economic deprivation and lack of agency can drive individuals toward moral compromise and even violence as a means of asserting their identity. Through these depictions, Adiga calls attention to the urgent need for societal change and the dismantling of exploitative systems. Karl Marx considered 'exploitation of labour' as unjust. He expects that working class should realize how they are exploited and revolt against the rich (bourgeoisie). Drivers who are working in rich people's house should do all the household works such as cleaning vessels, massaging and cooking etc... Balram is selected as a driver in Mr. Ashok's house. But he has to do all household works. He says "the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers and tailors. They simply have servants... I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a long broom, or chase a cow out of the compound" (Adiga 68).

Child labour, form of exploitation, is one of the results of poverty. It affects their education (illiteracy) and harmful to physical and mental health. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act of 2009 says that children aged 6 to 14 years should be given free education and it is a criminal offence to employ children below 14 or 16 years in factories, teashops etc... Major consequences of child labour are illiteracy and physical and mental diseases. Poverty is considered to be the key cause for child labour. More than 30% of people in India do not have proper food, shelter and clothes. So they cannot have proper schooling. Balram discontinues his studies in order to earn money for his family, though he is an intelligent boy. He says "Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling" (Adiga 10).

Adiga, through this novel, shows two important ways to emancipate from the oppressed. Resistance is considered as one way of emancipation. There are two kinds of resistance: passive resistance and active resistance. Active resistance refers to violent way of opposing the power. Passive resistance is the non-violent way of resistance. Balram remains passive to the oppression in the first part of the novel. In the later part, his anger towards his master (powerful) begins to expose. It shows that he determines to fight for his freedom no matter what the result will be. The strain that he has experienced makes him to murder his own master. Balram uses violent way to emancipate himself, as he is a "man of action and courage" (Adiga 5). He feels no guilty for murdering his master, instead he says that it is an act of justice.

Passive resistance is the non-violent way of achieving goals. In history, the best examples for non-violent resistance are protests, civil disobedience, noncooperation and Satyagraha. Marxists strongly believe that non-violent resistance is one of the best ways to bring about social change. Balram resists his grandmother, Kusum who is the controller of the whole family “every son and daughter-in-law lived in fear of her” (Adiga 16). In order to get out of her control, he leaves that village. Now, as he is working as a driver, he stopped sending money to his grandmother. So, through his school teacher, Kusum writes a letter to him asking money “Life has become hard here. The rains have failed. Can you ask your employer for some money for your family? (Adiga 190).

Adiga indicates that the second way to emancipate is by migrating from rural to urban area. Urbanization refers to ‘migration of small or large number of group of people from rural to urban area’. It started during the period of industrial revolution. Due to poverty and unemployment, large number of people migrated to urban areas. There is a lot of job opportunities in urban areas because of small and big industries. Adiga uses two symbols to denote the rural and urban area: light and darkness. Balram says,

You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness... I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds... Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand Your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an light, and an India of Darkness. (Adiga 14)

In village, people are still in darkness. They do not have proper water facilities and electricity. They are trying to get out of darkness (village) and want to live in light (urban). In Delhi, there are hundreds of workers staying by the roadside and involved in construction works. They are from darkness to light in order to develop their livelihood.

To conclude, Aravind Adiga masterfully depicts the harsh realities of oppression and the persistent pursuit of freedom, illustrating the deep class divisions that shape modern India. Through the journey of Balram Halwai, the novel underscores how systemic inequality confines the lower class within cycles of servitude, reinforced by societal expectations and economic structures. However, Balram’s eventual rebellion and rise to success highlight the possibility of resistance through morally ambiguous means. His transformation is both a critique of capitalist exploitation and an evidence to the power of individual agency in breaking free from oppression. Ultimately, Adiga’s novel challenges readers to question the cost of social mobility and the ethical dilemmas faced by those who dare to rise against the odds.

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