

## **Inequality in the novel of Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*: A Study**

---

**\*Dr. Yadagiri**

Asst Professor of English,  
Govt Degree College (Women)Nalgonda

---

**Article Received:** 24/05/2023

**Article Revised:** 26/06/2023

**Article Accepted:** 28/06/2023

**Published Online:** 30/06/2023

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2023.5.05.212

---

### **Abstract**

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) presents a sharp critique of social, economic, and moral inequality in post-liberalization India. Through the confessional narrative of Balram Halwai, the novel exposes the persistence of caste, class hierarchy, rural deprivation, corruption, and servitude beneath the rhetoric of national progress and globalization. This article examines inequality in the novel through Marxist, postcolonial, and social-justice perspectives. It argues that Adiga represents inequality not merely as unequal income, but as a structural system sustained by caste, political corruption, fear, and the internalized acceptance of subordination. Balram's violent escape from poverty reveals both the possibility of individual mobility and the ethical costs of advancement in an unequal society.

**Keywords:** Inequality, caste, class, globalization, servitude, corruption, *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga

### **Introduction**

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize, is a major work of contemporary Indian fiction that interrogates the unequal consequences of India's economic liberalization. The novel contrasts the prosperity of urban elites with the deprivation of rural and working-class communities, using Balram Halwai's journey from a village in "the Darkness" to entrepreneurial success in Bangalore as its central narrative.

The novel is set against the backdrop of a rapidly globalizing India, where economic growth coexists with poverty, exploitation, and corruption. Adiga does not present globalization as an uncomplicated force of progress; instead, he shows how new forms of capitalism often reproduce older hierarchies of caste and class.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To examine the forms of inequality represented in *The White Tiger*.
2. To analyse the relationship between caste, class, and economic deprivation in the novel.
3. To explore how Adiga critiques globalization, corruption, and neoliberal entrepreneurship.

4. To assess whether Balram's rise represents emancipation, moral failure, or both.
5. To interpret the novel's symbols especially "the Darkness," "the Light," and the "Rooster Coop" as representations of structural inequality.

Although India has experienced rapid economic growth since liberalization, inequality remains visible in unequal access to education, employment, healthcare, political power, and urban resources. *The White Tiger* dramatizes this contradiction by showing that the benefits of growth are unevenly distributed. The problem addressed in this article is therefore the ways in which Adiga represents inequality as a persistent and self-reproducing social structure rather than as an accidental condition of poverty.

### **Theoretical Framework**

**The study applies three complementary approaches:**

| Framework                  | Application to <i>The White Tiger</i>                                                                                 |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Marxist criticism          | Examines class exploitation, unequal ownership, labour relations, and Balram's position as a servant-driver.          |
| Postcolonial criticism     | Studies the continuation of colonial and caste-based hierarchies in independent India.                                |
| Foucauldian power analysis | Explains how domination operates through surveillance, fear, discipline, and self-regulation rather than force alone. |

From a Marxist perspective, Balram belongs to the labouring poor, while his employers represent a privileged class that controls wealth, property, and political influence. The novel shows that the rich maintain dominance not only through money but also through ideological control and the normalization of servitude.

### **Economic Inequality: "Darkness" and "Light"**

Adiga divides India into two symbolic worlds: "the Darkness," associated with rural poverty, backwardness, and lack of opportunity, and "the Light," associated with Delhi's wealthy elite and urban modernity. This division is not merely geographical; it represents unequal access to resources, education, and power.

Balram's village, Laxmangarh, is marked by poverty, poor infrastructure, landlord domination, and political corruption. In contrast, Delhi offers luxury apartments, shopping malls, private drivers, and consumer abundance for the elite. The novel thus exposes the sharp contrast between India's image as an emerging global economy and the lived deprivation of millions.

Globalization intensifies this divide rather than resolving it. While it creates opportunities for skilled and privileged groups, it also expands demand for cheap domestic labour, drivers, security guards, and service workers. Balram's employment as a chauffeur illustrates how the urban service economy depends upon the availability of poor, vulnerable workers.

### **Caste and Class Inequality**

Although caste discrimination is constitutionally prohibited in India, Adiga shows that caste continues to shape social identity and opportunity. Balram is born into the Halwai caste,

traditionally associated with sweet-making, and this inherited identity influences how others perceive his abilities and future.

In the village, caste appears openly through the power of landlords and the dependence of poor families upon them. In the city, caste becomes less visible but does not disappear; it reappears as occupational hierarchy, with drivers, servants, and guards occupying subordinate positions relative to their employers.

The novel therefore argues that modern India has not eliminated caste but transformed it into a “new caste system” of class and occupational segregation. Balram’s attempt to escape his caste identity through impersonation and entrepreneurship reveals both the rigidity and the instability of social hierarchy.

### **The “Rooster Coop”: Inequality as Psychological Bondage**

The most powerful metaphor of inequality in the novel is the “Rooster Coop.” Balram compares India’s poor to roosters confined in a cage: they see other birds being slaughtered, understand that they may be next, yet do not attempt to escape.

This metaphor suggests that inequality survives not only through economic deprivation but also through fear, family obligation, and internalized inferiority. The poor are prevented from rebelling because rebellion may bring punishment to their families, while social conditioning teaches them to accept servitude as natural.<sup>1</sup>

Balram’s escape from the coop is therefore both an act of resistance and a break from collective solidarity. He frees himself individually, but he does not transform the system that produced his oppression. This makes his rebellion deeply ambiguous

### **Corruption and Political Inequality**

Political corruption is another major dimension of inequality in the novel. Politicians, landlords, businessmen, and police officials form an interconnected network that protects the interests of the wealthy while denying justice to the poor. Elections, bribes, and criminal intimidation appear as instruments through which power is maintained.

The novel suggests that formal democracy does not automatically produce social equality. Although the poor possess the vote, their choices are often shaped by coercion, ignorance, and dependence upon powerful local figures. Adiga thus critiques the gap between democratic ideals and unequal social realities.

### **Moral Inequality and the Cost of Mobility**

Adiga links economic inequality with moral corruption. In a society where wealth determines status and survival, ethical boundaries become unstable. Balram’s murder of his employer, Ashok, is the decisive act through which he escapes servitude and acquires capital. However, the novel does not romanticize this act. Balram’s success is built upon violence, theft, and the appropriation of another person’s identity. His rise demonstrates that social mobility in an unequal system may require moral compromise.

At the same time, Adiga compels readers to ask whether Balram can be judged by ordinary moral standards when the system itself is violent and unjust. His crime becomes both an indictment of inequality and a disturbing consequence of it.

### **Balram as a Contradictory Figure**

Balram is not a conventional revolutionary or class warrior. He does not seek collective liberation for the poor; instead, he pursues individual escape through cunning, deception, and violence. Critics have noted that his narrative exposes the limits of neoliberal meritocracy, since his success depends upon corruption and the reproduction of exploitative structures.

His transformation from servant to entrepreneur can be read as a critique of capitalism, but it can also be interpreted as an endorsement of ruthless individualism. This contradiction is central to Adiga's vision: Balram challenges inequality, yet ultimately becomes part of the class of successful entrepreneurs whose advantages depend upon the continued existence of cheap labour.

### **Narrative Technique and Inequality**

Adiga uses first-person narration, irony, satire, and the epistolary form to foreground inequality. Balram writes letters to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, presenting himself as a guide to the "real" India. This device allows Adiga to challenge official narratives of national progress and expose the hidden violence behind economic success.

Balram's unreliable narration is also significant. His account is self-justifying and manipulative, forcing readers to question the relationship between poverty, truth, and criminality. The novel therefore represents inequality not only through its themes but also through its fractured and morally unstable narrative voice.

### **Findings**

- Inequality in *The White Tiger* is economic, social, political, spatial, and moral.
- Caste and class are interconnected; urban modernity changes the form of caste hierarchy but does not remove it.
- Globalization creates new opportunities for elites while deepening dependence on poorly paid service labour.
- The "Rooster Coop" represents the psychological mechanism through which the poor are kept in servitude.
- Corruption functions as a system that preserves the privileges of the rich and blocks justice for the poor.
- Balram's mobility is individual rather than collective; it exposes inequality but does not provide a democratic solution to it.

### **Conclusion**

*The White Tiger* is not simply the story of one man's rise from poverty to wealth; it is a critique of the structures that make such a rise rare, dangerous, and morally compromised. Adiga presents inequality as a cycle sustained by poverty, caste, corruption, fear, and the internalization of servitude.

The novel challenges the celebratory narrative of India's economic rise by showing that modernity and globalization can coexist with deep social injustice. Balram's final success is therefore deeply ironic: he escapes the "Darkness," but only by adopting the ruthlessness of the system he condemns. Through this contradiction, Adiga exposes the moral cost of inequality in contemporary India.

**References**

- Adiga, A. (2008). *The White Tiger*. HarperCollins.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books.
- Kumar, P. (2012). Globalization and the New Servitude in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. *Postcolonial Text*, 7(3), 1–12.
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1. Penguin Classics.
- Mukherjee, M. (2009). The Aesthetics of Resistance in *The White Tiger*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(3), 63–68.
- Rajan, R. (2010). Inequality and Global Capital in Contemporary Indian Fiction. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 33(2), 245–259.