

The Cost of Ambition: Identity, Morality, and the Pursuit of Success in Modern India

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Abstract

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga stands as the author's first novel, the bitter realist for the modern India and the cost of advancement from being a servant, even if to someone more fortunate. Consequently, the following paper aims to provide a detailed understanding of how the novel presents prejudice, ethical status, or the notion of achievement and ambition, through the main fictional character, Balram Halwai who, from being a village boy, a victim of oppression, rises to an elite position of an auto-driver in the city of Bangalore, India. This paper evaluates the extent to which the barefoot immigrant's desire for upward mobility erodes his personality and ethical fabric. According to the article, Adiga's novel merely depicts a story of the fateful fall of its narrator as a result of his failure to gain success in a society which values success without considering the cost of attaining it especially in a world of ironical moral relativity. Moreover, the novel, The White Tiger, in the final analysis, becomes a vehement invitation to rejection of the detrimental effect that desire has on one's self and morality in colonial India which is a society characterized by classism and utter exclusion of the oppressed Dalit peasants.

Keywords: Ambition; Identity; Morality; Success; Modern India

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, The White Tiger, which won the Man Booker Prize, chronicles the ascent of Balram Halwai from a destitute rural lad to a successful businessperson. Adiga scrutinises the darker side of India's economic miracle with a critical perspective. Hailed as "a masterpiece that will take its place as one of the great books about the country" by noted author Anita Desai (qtd. in Adiga, book jacket), Adiga's novel offers a searing exploration of the cost of ambition for those seeking to escape the shackles of oppression in contemporary

India. As Balram claws his way up from servitude to the echelons of the entrepreneurial class through dubious and even criminal means, his journey raises unsettling questions about the sacrifice of the self and the erosion of ethics in the quest for upward mobility. This article argues that *The White Tiger* serves as a cautionary tale illuminating the corrosive effects of an unchecked obsession with success on individual identity and moral integrity. Through a close reading of Adiga's text supplemented by secondary sources, I examine how Balram's ambition exacts a steep price, fragmenting his identity and corroding his moral compass. Furthermore, the article situates Balram's personal narrative within the broader context of an India grappling with stark divides between the haves and have-nots, arguing that the novel functions as an indictment of a modern Indian society complicit in perpetuating systems of oppression and exploitation.

The India of Light and Darkness

From the outset, *The White Tiger* establishes the schism between two Indias, the India of Light and the India of Darkness. Balram hails from the Darkness, a world defined by its "lack of sewage, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy and punctuality" (Adiga 14). The key hallmarks of life in the Darkness are poverty, deprivation, and the rigid strictures of the feudal social order, symbolized by the four landlords who control every aspect of village life. Balram states, "These four...fed on the village, and everything that grew in it, until there was nothing left for anyone else" (20). The rich enjoy outsized power and privilege, while the poor toil in misery, denied basic rights and opportunities.

In contrast stands the India of Light, a shining realm of wealth, knowledge and technology enjoyed by a privileged few. Yet as critic Mendes observes, "Even in the apparently enlightened India of Light there are spaces of darkness" (280). The Light, ostensibly a site of progress and opportunity, simply reproduces in new forms the old hierarchies and exploitations of the Darkness. Balram discovers this hard truth in Delhi, where he encounters "an even more extreme embodiment of the dualities in Indian society than in his village" (Sebastian 65). Even the gleaming shopping malls conceal hidden zones of deprivation, as evidenced by the slum with "tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets" that Balram visits on a

rare day off (Adiga 193). The Light, for all its seductive trappings, offers little true social mobility for the likes of Balram.

The Rooster Coop and Inequality

Central to Balram's dawning political consciousness is the symbol of the rooster coop, a metaphor for the oppressive social conditions that keep India's poor imprisoned in a state of perpetual servitude. The roosters in the coop "see the organs of their brothers lying around them...They know they're next - yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop" (173). Similarly, the Darkness traps its inhabitants in an unending cycle of poverty and submission, as the wealthy and powerful work to maintain the status quo. As Balram states, "The greatest thing to come out of this country in its ten thousand year history is the Rooster Coop" (175).

The rooster coop emerges as a powerful symbol of systemic inequality in modern India, where a rigid "social and economic hierarchy dictate a preordained structure of oppression and entrapment" (Waller 3). Opportunities for advancement remain painfully elusive for those born into poverty, while the privileged few enjoy outsize power and wealth. This inequality fuels Balram's resentment towards his masters and his recognition of "the sheer unfairness of his plight" (Khor 33). Awakening to his own oppression under the current system, Balram resolves to break free from the rooster coop, even if it means resorting to unethical, even violent means.

Identity and Individuality

Balram's journey from subservient villager to cutthroat entrepreneur is marked by a radical transformation of identity, as he sheds the trappings of his low caste status and forges a new self. Born into the sweet-maker caste, Balram feels cheated of his destiny of being "fat and creamy-skinned and smiling" (Adiga 64). His name itself robs him of individuality; "Munna" simply means boy, not a true name at all. Treated as just another faceless member of the servant class, Balram seethes at his status as "human spider" (51), mechanically wiping tables and crushing coals. Yet a spark of individuality emerges when a schoolteacher identifies him

as a rarity, a "White Tiger" (35) whose intellectual gifts set him apart from the great mass of have-nots.

Balam clings to this early recognition of his potential, stoking his drive to rise above his preordained station in life. His tenure as a driver for the wealthy landlord Mr. Ashok exposes Balam to new identities and modes of being; by eavesdropping on his master's conversations, he receives "a rich education in India, in English, in American culture" (Sebastian 67). Yet even as Balam soaks up knowledge, he bristles against his identity as a mere servant, "for half a second...body and brain" (Adiga 138) with his employer. Ultimately, Balam realizes that to fulfill his ambitions, he must reject the identity foisted on him by an unjust society and create himself anew.

The Corruption of Morality

As Balam strives to escape the rooster coop and vault himself into the capitalist elite, he undergoes a profound moral transformation, abandoning his ethical moorings in favor of pure self-interest. Early on, Balam recognizes the corruption endemic to modern Indian society, observing his employers' casual bribery of politicians and police. He notes, "A total of ninety-three criminal cases...are pending against the Great Socialist and his ministers" (Adiga 98). Witnessing the moral rot at the highest echelons of society, Balam begins to question the value of honesty and integrity in a world rigged to exploit the weak.

Balam's first foray into ethical transgression occurs when he agrees to take the fall for a fatal hit-and-run committed by Pinky Madam, his master's wife. Though Balam is "the picture of innocence" (169), he signs a false confession to protect his employers, a decision reflecting both his subservience and his recognition of the unfairness of the justice system. This event plants the seeds of Balam's growing moral flexibility; he increasingly views ethics as a luxury of the rich, a mere obstacle in his path to advancement. Yet even as Balam ascends to the ranks of Bangalore's entrepreneurial class, founding a successful taxi service, his moral corruption continues apace. He readily hands out bribes, sees his drivers as expendable, and treats his family with cruel neglect, refusing to visit his ailing grandmother. As Sebastian observes, "Balam's entrepreneurial success in Bangalore is but a mirror image of the lifestyle of the landlords in his village" (72). Far from overthrowing the iniquitous social order,

Balram merely replicates it, becoming a master in place of a servant. His unswerving pursuit of success at any cost raises troubling questions about the toll of ambition on both individual ethics and the moral health of the wider society.

The Price of Ambition

Ultimately, *The White Tiger* raises unsettling questions about the true price of success in modern India. Is the fulfillment of individual ambition worth the sacrifice of personal morality? Can a society riven by corruption and injustice produce success stories untainted by ethical rot? Adiga's novel suggests that under current conditions, the relentless pursuit of upward mobility almost inevitably entails a Faustian bargain, in which aspiring individuals must barter away their moral principles for a shot at the top. As Balram's story demonstrates, even the most downtrodden, through a combination of drive, ingenuity and ruthlessness, can fight their way out of poverty and servitude. Yet this success demands a terrible price: the surrender of ethical integrity and the dissolution of a coherent sense of self.

Balram's transformation into the hard-charging, conscienceless entrepreneur represents the logical endpoint of a society that prizes ambition and acquisition above all else. In an India increasingly characterised by stark inequalities and winner-take-all capitalism, "morality becomes a commodity that is too expensive for Balram to afford" (Khor 44). To succeed in this climate, Balram must shed the ethical norms that restrain his lust for wealth and power, viewing morality as merely another handicap keeping the poor shackled to their miserable fates. As Balram declares, "I'm tomorrow" (Adiga 6), yet this tomorrow is one in which success comes at the cost of the soul.

Through Balram's narrative, Adiga offers a searing indictment of the rampant inequality, exploitation and moral decay afflicting modern Indian society. In an India divided into Light and Darkness, two distinct yet interconnected realms defined by the chasm between rich and poor, the traditional bonds of community and ethical obligation have frayed beyond repair. Critic Waller argues that the novel depicts Indian society itself as suffering from a "corruption of consciousness," in which the "toxic divide" between the haves and have-nots warps moral norms and degrades individuals on both sides of the gulf (5).

Drawing on this line of thought, Adiga paints a rather ruthless representation of the Indian society where the conflict between personal advancement and the ethic of decency indicates a sick society that is in evident need of overhaul. In a country facing issues of ethnic divisions and concepts of self and other in the modern world, race against time with regards to power overrides societal morality leaving a whip in the hands of anybody who wishes to achieve the power at all cost, resulting in the breakdown in the fabric of society and the overriding order and common good.

Conclusion

The White Tiger, at its core, is an unflinching portrait of contemporary India seen through the eyes of a man who rises from the position of a poor slapstick actor, who worked as a chauffeur for a rich man and his stupid son, and a successful entrepreneur. Speaking through the persona of the ambitious rickshaw puller Balram Halwai, Adiga mingles questions of identity and moral integrity with questions of self-advancement in a society in the throes of the irreversible processes of social mobility and the formalization of poverty. Much as Balram did realise this burning desire of restricted life in the rooster coop of the Indian underclass and ends up selling his soul while fragmenting his own identity and ethically compromising in more ways than one in the process of achieving his goal. Captain and Salaam are disturbed characters whose stories depict the true price for achievement in a world that celebrates privilege and dominance driven by social injustice systems.

The life of Balram illustrates the fact that the unwavering attempts to realize own selfish purposes in the social context where one is free from moral obligations gradually results in the deterioration of individual character and society. Indeed, following Ceaser's critic, The White Tiger unveils the fact that what has been aggressively sold as the ambition for social mobility is in fact blatant greed, raw power, and social revolution. It is therefore for this reason that Adiga's depiction of India and its underbelly is a grim reflection that makes the reader engage in some of pertinent and probing questions with regard to the place of morality in the contemporary world, as well as the COOL theme of success at any cost. In the clamping mercenary world where disparity between the haves and have nots is becoming more bare Macaulay's The White Tiger portrays and highlights a nouveau riche and an

unapologetically evil society eating its own in its haste to embrace modernity and sustainable development.

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