



Evolution of an Unethical Subaltern in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

The term "subaltern" refers to individuals subjected to subordination based on class, caste, gender, age, office, or other societal hierarchies. Those in subaltern positions often strive to break free from hegemonic structures that confine them. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai, the protagonist, represents an evolving subaltern who abandons ethical considerations in his quest for power and success. His transformation involves deceit, betrayal, and violence stealing from his employer, undermining fellow workers, engaging in immoral acts, committing murder, and using bribery to evade justice. Although he achieves external liberation, he remains psychologically trapped in subjugation, symbolized by his assumption of a new identity, Ashok Sharma, the very name of his slain master. This study explores how Balram's rise as an entrepreneur embodies the dark reality of crony capitalism, where unethical means are justified by material success. Once an innocent villager, he turns into a self-serving, unscrupulous individual, contributing to a morally degraded environment. In today's globalized world, fostering values such as integrity, honesty, compassion, and perseverance is essential. By prioritizing ethical conduct, true success can be achieved not only in terms of wealth but also in inner fulfilment, social harmony, and collective progress.

Key Words: *Subaltern, ethics, class, caste, domination, bribery*

Introduction

Bill Gates, co-founder of Microsoft, once stated, "If you were born poor, it was not your mistake, but if you die poor, it is your mistake" (Medrut). These words have served as motivation for many individuals striving for success. A prime example of such ambition is Balram Halwai, the protagonist of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, which won the 2008 Man Booker Prize. Balram, born into poverty as the son of a rickshaw puller, is raised with the aspiration of breaking free from the shackles of his social class. His father, refusing to conform to the feudal order of their village, chooses the arduous profession of rickshaw pulling in hopes

of providing his children with better opportunities. He dreams of their education as a means of escaping hardship. However, Balram's academic journey is cut short despite his intelligence, which earns him the title of "White Tiger" from a visiting school inspector. This unique recognition marks him as an individual distinct from his lethargic peers, symbolizing his potential to rise above his circumstances (Adiga 35).

Determined to succeed, Balram ultimately becomes an entrepreneur in Bangalore, albeit through questionable means. Adopting the identity of Ashok Sharma, he secures financial success by murdering his employer and stealing 700,000 rupees. His journey is fuelled by selfish ambition and greed, leading him to employ unethical tactics, including bribery and corruption, to solidify his status (292). This study explores Balram's transformation into an unethical subaltern who achieves financial success at the cost of morality, underscoring the novel's central theme that "the means do not always justify the end." In this context, Gus Speth, co-founder of the New Economic Law Centre, once reflected, "I used to think the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change... The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy... To address these issues, we need to undergo a spiritual and cultural transformation. We, as scientists, lack the knowledge to achieve this transformation" ("Devine"). The researcher attempts to highlight a similar theme within *The White Tiger*, emphasizing the necessity of moral and ethical awareness in fostering an equitable society. By examining Balram's moral descent, this paper sheds light on the pressing need for a cultural shift towards integrity, truth, and perseverance.

The Epistolary Format and Its Significance

The White Tiger employs an epistolary narrative style, unfolding through a series of letters written by Balram to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (Adiga 3). This literary technique offers readers an intimate insight into Balram's thoughts and ambitions, free from the author's direct influence. Through these letters, he candidly reveals the harsh realities of social oppression, economic disparity, and moral degradation. His reflections contrast India's proclaimed democratic values with the country's systemic inequalities, illustrating how corruption and class division persist despite modernization.

One of Balram's central observations concerns the global shift of economic power. He argues that the future belongs to China and India, while Western nations squander their time on hedonistic pursuits such as substance abuse and entertainment (6). Through his letters, he conveys his aspirations and critiques of societal structures, underscoring the disconnect between democracy and true equality.

Subaltern Elements in *The White Tiger*

Balram's story is emblematic of subaltern struggles, providing a lens to examine the socio-economic and caste-based oppression in India. His journey from servitude to criminality underscores the desperation born from systemic discrimination. The novel exposes the grim realities faced by marginalized individuals, urging readers to recognize the urgent need for reform in socio-economic and political spheres. A key theme in the novel is the disparity between the privileged and the impoverished. Balram employs dark humour a genre

characterized by its morbid yet satirical tone to highlight these injustices. This technique makes the grim reality more digestible while compelling readers to reflect on societal inequities (Upadhye).

Balram vividly describes the plight of India's illiterate population, likening their minds to fragmented museums of outdated knowledge. He states that if one were to peer inside their skulls with a penlight, they would find scattered remnants of school lessons, forgotten history facts, and snippets of radio broadcasts (Adiga 10). This metaphor encapsulates the incomplete and fractured nature of their education. Similarly, he contrasts the bodies of the rich and poor, comparing a wealthy man's physique to soft cotton while depicting a poor man's spine as a frayed rope, akin to those used by village women to draw water from wells (26).

In critiquing caste divisions, Balram observes that while India once had hundreds of castes, the modern era has reduced society to two categories: "Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies." According to him, the ultimate fate of individuals is either to consume or be consumed (64). This stark perspective underscores the merciless nature of class struggle. Additionally, he likens elections to a severe disease, asserting that while people discuss them endlessly, they wield no real influence over their outcomes—similar to eunuchs discussing the *Kama Sutra* (98).

Through the character of Balram Halwai, *The White Tiger* presents a critique of socio-economic disparities, corruption, and moral decline. Balram's rise from poverty to wealth is not a tale of meritocracy but rather one of calculated deception and violence. His transformation into an unethical subaltern reveals the moral compromises often required for social mobility within an unjust system. The novel ultimately serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating the consequences of an unchecked pursuit of success. In a globalized world where ambition often overshadows ethics, it is imperative to promote values such as integrity, truth, and compassion. Only through such a cultural transformation can society move towards genuine equality and inclusive growth. By examining *The White Tiger* through the lens of subaltern theory, this study highlights the necessity of ethical awareness in both individual aspirations and broader societal structures. Balram Halwai's story is not just a critique of India's socio-economic conditions but also a universal warning about the dangers of moral erosion in the face of ambition.

Feudalism:

The White Tiger explores themes of subjugation, particularly through India's entrenched feudal system. The term "feudalism" originates from the Old French word "fief," meaning "fee," and historically refers to a system where land was leased in exchange for labour rather than monetary payment (Cartwright). The novel's protagonist, Balram, illustrates the deep impact of this system on the rural poor through his personal experiences. He describes his upbringing in Laxmangarh, a village near the Ganges, characterized by extreme poverty. The village was controlled by four landlords—Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar, and Raven—who monopolized essential resources like farmland and water bodies. These landlords exploited the villagers both financially and physically, enjoying a life of luxury while the poor struggled. Despite its resources, the village lacked technological advancements, political awareness, and education. Balram's ultimate goal was to escape

this oppressive environment, and when he finally does, he proclaims, "I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in darkness."

Political Subjugation:

The novel critiques India's corrupt political system, highlighting how dishonesty and crime have become prerequisites for political success. Balram exposes this corruption through figures like the "Great Socialist," a leader facing multiple criminal charges, including murder and financial fraud. Balram humorously claims to be India's most dedicated voter despite never having cast a ballot himself, pointing to the widespread electoral manipulation. A stark contrast is drawn between China's governance and India's democracy. While China boasts infrastructure and global achievements, it lacks democratic freedom. Conversely, India takes pride in its democracy despite issues like inadequate sanitation and underdeveloped sports facilities. This irony underscores Balram's cynicism toward the political system.

Class Struggles:

Urban spaces provide an opportunity for the marginalized to escape caste and economic constraints, yet the elite maintain their dominance. As a chauffeur for the Stork family, Balram witnesses how rigid social hierarchies prevent lower-class individuals from earning respect. He experiences discrimination firsthand when denied entry into a shopping mall due to his attire sandals instead of shoes marking him as an outsider. Balram sympathizes with his fellow workers, many of whom are unfairly accused of crimes committed by their wealthy employers. The judicial system, tainted by bribery, neglects these injustices. Capitalists exploit the servitude ingrained in the lower class, ensuring that the poor remain trapped in a "Rooster Coop," unable to break free from systemic oppression (Anh).

Psychological Subjugation:

The novel suggests that oppression is not only physical but psychological. Even after leaving the village, individuals struggle with an ingrained servitude mindset. Balram acknowledges this, stating, "Once a servant, always a servant the instinct is always inside him." His desire to break free from this conditioning fuels his ambition. Indian-American scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* argues that knowledge production often serves dominant groups while silencing marginalized voices. Balram challenges this by asserting his own narrative and striving for independence.

Ethics and Corruption:

Ethics, defined as principles distinguishing right from wrong, is a recurring theme. Balram's father, a poor rickshaw puller, instills in him the dream of escaping servitude. However, Balram chooses an unethical path to achieve success. The novel critiques the erosion of moral values, showing how corruption becomes a survival mechanism.

Exploitation of Religion:

Religious beliefs, meant to promote morality, are often manipulated for personal gain. Sociologist Suresh Kohli argues that religion in India is frequently used for prosperity rather than genuine spirituality. Balram exploits religious divisions, exposing a fellow driver's hidden Muslim identity to push him out of a job, showcasing how religion can be weaponized.

Deception and Fraud:

Balram learns the art of deception to climb the social ladder. He engages in fuel theft, forges repair bills, and uses his employer's car as an unregistered taxi. These fraudulent activities mark his transformation from an innocent village boy to a cunning entrepreneur, highlighting how dishonesty becomes a tool for survival.

Murder and Justification:

A series of humiliations lead Balram to justify murdering his employer, Ashok. Initially kind, Ashok is overshadowed by his brother Mukesh, who treats Balram with contempt. The breaking point comes when Balram realizes that his social status will never improve unless he takes drastic action. Seizing the opportunity when Ashok withdraws a large sum of money for a political bribe, Balram kills him and steals the money, believing it is his only chance at freedom.

Corruption and Self-Reflection:

Despite achieving success, Balram continues his corrupt ways. Operating under the alias "Ashok Sharma," he bribes police officers to protect his business. This cycle of corruption reveals that unethical behaviour is not just a means of survival but a path to prosperity. Balram acknowledges his transformation, admitting, "The rest of the story is about how I became full of wickedness and immorality."

Bribery as a Systemic Issue:

Bribery reinforces societal inequality. Balram's ability to thrive despite his criminal past underscores the systemic nature of corruption, which hinders national progress and deepens social divides. His story illustrates how financial power dictates justice.

The White Tiger critiques feudalism, class disparity, political corruption, and moral decay. Through Balram's journey, the novel exposes the ethical dilemmas individuals face while striving for success in an unjust society. His rise from a village servant to a wealthy entrepreneur highlights the compromises required to break free from systemic oppression. However, the novel leaves readers questioning whether true liberation can be achieved through unethical means or if Balram has merely adopted the corrupt practices of the elite he once despised.

Conclusion:

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a bold and uncompromising portrayal of corruption, debauchery, and manipulation practiced by a section of Indian society that has its repercussions in areas of social inequality, religious tension, and conflicts across classes and cultures that cede the transformation of the nation on a larger scale. The protagonist's journey from poverty to wealth exemplifies the typical trajectory of his unscrupulous, unethical, and immoral methods. Despite Balram's success as the founder of a new company, "The White Tiger Drivers Company," in the sprawling metropolitan city of Bangalore, humanity is threatened by a new breed of criminals and thugs who resort to unethical and immoral methods to further their vested interests. Thus, the novel glaringly highlights the darker sides of everyday India, where corruption and unethical ways are deemed necessary to one's career advancement and social reputation. Corrupt, immoral, and unethical ways are not unique to India, as their webs are visible all over the globe. However, India's unfortunate reality is that instead of eradicating these vices, they continue to rise. The political, economic, and religious practices in India do contribute directly or indirectly to its unprecedented growth. Thus, this study tries to disseminate the principle that 'The means do not justify the end' by highlighting the darker areas of inequality based on castes, culture, and class. The right and proper practice could be that everyone uses appropriate and fair methods to accomplish their objectives. In today's globalised world, it is crucial to disseminate the noble virtues and values of integrity, truth, charity, and perseverance in good work. This will lead to success in both personal and professional spheres, resulting in a bountiful harvest of contentment, peace, and joy. This will pave the way for an inclusive growth and societal transformation in all spheres of life.

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