



## Analysing The Novel The White Tiger Through The Gramscian Philosophy Of Praxis And Foucauldian Interplay Of Power And Resistance

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses Arvind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, for which he received the Booker Prize in 2008. This groundbreaking work shows the harsh realities of 21st-century globalised Indian society, which is ridden with class conflicts.

The Marxian class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat drives the whole plot of the novel. The narrative is characterised by the master/slave and have/have-not dichotomies. It is written in epistolary form. The narrator, Balram Halwai, exposes the dark underbelly of society where the means of production are in the hands of those who wield power in the system. However, Balram shows an exceptional vigour for revolution to bring about a new order in the world where the tables have turned, and the proletariat topples the bourgeoisie regime.

Following the same Marxist strain, we will explore the concepts of 'Hegemony' and 'Organic Intellectuals' introduced by the prominent Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci, ways to overcome it through revolution, and the Foucauldian ideas of 'Power and Resistance', which are embodied in the character of Balram in the novel.

**Keyterms** – Bourgeoisie, Class-struggle, Hegemony, Intellectuals, Proletariat, Power, Resistance, Marxism, Anti-Hero

### Introduction

*The White Tiger* is a thought-provoking and utterly captivating novel by Arvind Adiga that provides a dark satirical account of the modern and globalised society that we live in. The protagonist is portrayed as an anti-hero hailing from an underprivileged section of society. Nonetheless, he is witty and shrewd and has learned how to climb up the social ladder even at the cost of questionable morality that the society claims to profess. The novel is in epistolary form, wherein the protagonist unravels the story in his series of letters addressed to the Chinese Premier – Mr. Wen Jiabao – who is visiting India for some business.

To express his disgruntlement with the present order of things, he exposes the society's evils, façade, and hypocrisy, sprucely divided between the rich and the poor. He sheds light on this reality and says, "Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" [1, p.10]. He further says, "These days, there are just two castes: men with big bellies and men with small bellies. And only two destinies – eat or get eaten up" [1, p.38]. These lines clearly show how the upper class maintain their dominance in society.

The Italian political thinker, Antonio Gramsci, introduced some of his key ideas of hegemony, organic intellectuals vs. traditional intellectuals in his *Prison Notebooks* – a series of essays written between 1929 and 1935. According to Gramsci, hegemony is the concept of appropriation of bourgeoisie dominance, according to which the ruling class elicits spontaneous consent from the masses for its ideology. The

bourgeoisie/ruling class perpetuates hegemony through cultural, moral, and ideological leadership over the subaltern classes. It is exercised both through the base and the superstructure. It is also based on a balance between coercion and consent. The state can be divided into Political society, which includes the army, police, and law, which legitimises its rule through the use of force, and Civil society, which encompasses the education system, family, religion, and media, where domination is practised through persuasion. Hegemony through consent is deeper and more subtle. It seeps into the consciousness of the subordinate class or the proletariat class, wherein they do not acknowledge the manipulation and exploitation on the part of the oppressor. The bourgeoisie maintains control over the social, political, and economic spheres while pretending to safeguard the interests of the subaltern classes to get their support.

The focal problem of the proletariat class is that they are stuck in the ‘rooster coop,’ as Balram likes to call it in the novel. The oppressed are trapped in this cage and do not even try to break out. The rich crush, slaughter, and defeat them, but they are scared to revolt and take charge of their fate. Gramsci believes that the proletariat should revolt against this hegemonic rule and create counter-hegemonic forces to fight the blatant domination.

Gramsci believes that the so-called ‘organic intellectuals’ are responsible for bringing about such a change. He divides intellectuals into two categories: traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals.

Traditional intellectuals are the social agents of past traditions. They are not concerned with the prevailing economic structure and are detached from class struggles. They want to take a neutral stance on everything. However, they often try to enforce the dominant ideology of the ruling class by performing their respective roles as clergy, scholars, artists, etc.

On the other hand, Organic intellectuals are the “dominant group’s deputies” [2] or the spokesperson(s) of a particular social class. Every social class can produce their own set of organic intellectuals. They identify with the cause of class struggle and aim to mobilise the masses. They represent a class’s aspirations and actively work towards their realisation. Their work is to unite the people of a particular social group, organise and assimilate their ideology and create awareness vis-à-vis their position in society.

In the novel, we see that only a person as rare as the majestic ‘White Tiger’, who is born once in a century, dares to break out of that rooster coop and emerges to bring about a revolution and tries to establish a new order. Balram Halwai sees himself as that figure who will topple the hegemony of the rich upper class and become a part of that hegemonic order. His character also strongly resonates with the Nietzschean “Übermensch” or the Superman conceptualised in his theory, which Nietzsche introduced in his book ‘*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.’ The Überman transcends the conventional societal moral and ethical limitations to carve out a new path through revolutionary ideas and actions. However, this is an extensive discourse and would need a separate discussion.

Back to Gramsci’s theory, he discusses the importance of intellectuals in resisting hegemony. According to him, all emergent social groups produce intellectuals as they come into existence. For him, all humans are intellectuals in that they perform a minimum of intellectual activity in addition to their physical activity, but not all humans have the function of intellectuals in society. Intellectuals are of two kinds – traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals. He emphasises the role of organic intellectuals and how they can help the proletariat attain freedom and a position of power.

This implies that establishing proletarian hegemony is crucial before a socialist revolution can occur. However, a question arises regarding how the proletariat can achieve a dominant position within the economy when the bourgeoisie, who controls the means of production, holds economic power.

The answer to this question is that the subaltern classes can unite and develop a counter-hegemonic force against the bourgeoisie through collective action and the formation of a new collective will. By forging alliances with other social groups and advocating for their shared interests, the proletariat can work towards achieving a position of dominance within the economy. This process involves building a broad-based movement that includes multiple classes and sectors of society, strengthening the chances of success for a socialist revolution.

If understood in the context of the novel, we can see the protagonist rise above his position through a series of irrevocable actions that violate all moral and ethical boundaries. After being a faithful servant to Mr. Ashok and after having witnessed the corruption and manipulation perpetrated by the so-called upper class, he resolves to kill his master to avenge all those whom he represents. He believes this is the only way to break out of the coop and get to the other side. He has no regret and finds his actions justified. After the cold-blooded murder, he moves to Bangalore and becomes an entrepreneur. He runs his cab service and has numerous employees working for him. However, he treats them with respect and humanity. We can note how Balram has become an intellectual himself. He knows that it is through education that true revolution can be brought about. He says the real end of education is to make human beings real human beings, full of

human qualities.

Having said that, the role of an intellectual is one of great responsibility, and even though Balram commits a heinous crime against his master, his character finds redemption by the sheer honesty with which he narrates the whole story and reveals the circumstances that have led him to where he finally is. His character is complex, multi-layered and has grey areas. Hence, he hangs somewhere between a hero and a villain. Nevertheless, his compelling storytelling makes the reader think about the dubious ideas of morality and ethics perpetuated by society.

Another lens through which the novel can be perceived is the Foucauldian Theory. Foucault talks about power/knowledge in his work, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings (1972–1977)*, wherein he discusses the nature of power. He contends that “Power is essentially that which represses.” [3,p.90] In *The History of Sexuality Volume I*, He posits that Power is everywhere; no because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere.” [4,p.93] It is also pervasive within every society. He employs the concept of “power/knowledge” to emphasise that power is not just repressive and coercive but also intricately intertwined with the established forms of knowledge, scientific understanding, and notions of “truth.” According to Foucault, truth is not abstract or universal but rather is shaped by social and historical contexts. It is produced through various mechanisms of constraint and, in turn, generates the effects of power. Foucault’s concept of “power/knowledge” highlights the interplay between power and knowledge systems. Truth is not an objective or universal entity but is contingent on social and historical contexts. Power exercises its influence by shaping the production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge, determining what is accepted as true and authoritative. Understanding the dynamics of power/knowledge reveals how power operates through the control and regulation of knowledge within societies. He proclaims that power can be converted into knowledge and vice versa, and it also inevitably produces resistance. He posits that power cannot be absolute as it necessitates the presence of resistance as a counter-power. The discourse of counter-power offers an opportunity to challenge the dominant power structure. It also creates counter-knowledge, which can subvert the power dynamics functioning within the society.

Hence, this same idea of ‘Resistance’ is also pivotal to the analysis of the novel. Balram Halwai, who comes from a rural village called Laxmangarh, is the son of a poor rickshaw puller. Their family (much like other poor families of the village) is exploited by the wealthy landlords referred to as “The Animals”: The Stork, The Buffalo, The Raven, and The Wild Boar. They levy a heavy tax on these helpless people and exercise ruthless domination over them. Balram (very early on) becomes aware of the fact that these rich people thrive at the cost of the poor. Despite being a prodigy, he is forced out of school to support his family by working at a tea stall. However, Balram knows that he does not belong there, and he is restless to get out into the real world and experience what he has been forbidden to. He dreams big and is quite observant of people. One day, he overhears someone talking about the lucrative prospect of being a chauffeur in the city. Eventually, by sheer luck and his conviction, he lands a job as a chauffeur at one of the landlords. He drives the car for Mr Ashok Sharma, son of the cruel landlord, who has just returned from the States along with his wife Pinky. Soon, Balram begins to understand the ways of these rich men. They may appear generous and charitable, but behind the façade, they are rotten and corrupt to the core. Balram learns about the illegal business of his employers of selling coal from government mines. They bribe politicians to remain out of trouble and run their business smoothly. Thus, this is how they maintain their dominant status in society and play a huge role in controlling and affecting the market forces as well.

Another critical episode in the novel is the fatal accident where Pinky Madam (Mr Ashok’s wife) kills a young man in a hit-and-run accident. Soon after that unfortunate event occurs, Balram is summoned to his master’s residence. There, he is forced to take full responsibility for the crime to save Pinky Madam. It is at that moment that he realises how these cruel people of the so-called upper class can fabricate truth and use their servants as scapegoats. It is a moment of disillusionment for Balram and the last nail in the coffin before he makes up his mind and justifies his intent to kill his master.

Although his actions cannot be justified, they pose a resistance to power. Eventually, after committing the cold-blooded murder of Ashok – his master – and taking the bribe money he was carrying with him, he absconds and decides to start his life afresh in Bangalore. He assumes his late master’s name, Ashok Sharma, and starts an entrepreneurial venture of running a taxi service agency, which seems to be a booming enterprise in this tech city. However, Balram is considerate of his employees, pays them decent salaries and maintains a quite professional relationship with them. If there is an accident with any of his taxis, he does not let the blame fall on the driver; rather, he takes full accountability for it, being the owner of the agency.

Through such measures, he also manages to avert any possibility of dissent amongst his employees. Thus,

he becomes free from servitude and establishes a new order at the cost of his debatable morality. His confession of his crime in the letter addressed to the Chinese Premier, Mr. Wen Jiabao, reveals his true intentions of committing the crime. He also does not feel any remorse for his doing as it is a form of resistance which enabled him to break out of the rooster coop and reinvent himself.

**Conclusion** – The purpose of critically analysing these theories is to form an idea of how the hegemonic forces are played out in society. This paper is purely a Marxist analysis, but with certain deviations and innovations made by these political theorists. Power and Resistance go hand in hand as seen in the case of Balram, who creates his fate and takes charge of the narrative. He can also be seen as a quintessential Nietzschean Übermensch who transcends morality and tries to create a new order. Through Gramsci's lens, he can be seen as a subverting force to hegemony who poses counter-hegemony.

Through the Foucauldian perspective, he is the embodiment of resistance to power. Even though his actions cannot be justified, his character has redeeming qualities. As readers, we understand where he is coming from and get to question the dubious moral and ethical standards of the so-called respectable upper-class society. The protagonist does not have any intentions of changing society and the order of things. Rather, he just wants to make sure not to be at the receiving end of it.

The novel leaves us flabbergasted, stunned, and disillusioned with the societal codes by revealing the grey areas which often go unnoticed in a world that may seem to offer reality as just black and white. Overall, analysing this work through these key literary theories allows us to reinterpret literature and provide a new framework for further research work. While Gramsci's theory highlights the structural and ideological roots of domination through hegemony, with an emphasis on the role of organic intellectuals in challenging the status quo, Foucault shifts the lens to the more dispersed and everyday workings of power—how it circulates through discourse, institutions, and systems of knowledge. Despite their different approaches, both thinkers see power as something more than brute force; it is deeply embedded in the fabric of society, shaping how people think, act, and relate to one another. Gramsci's concept of consent-based hegemony parallels Foucault's idea of power/knowledge, where knowledge becomes a tool for maintaining dominance. Likewise, resistance, for both, is not an external force but something that emerges from within the very system of power itself, whether through counter-hegemonic movements in Gramsci or the inevitable resistance Foucault sees as part of any power relation. This overlap allows for a more layered reading of *The White Tiger*, where Balram's rebellion is both a challenge to the dominant ideology and an act of resistance shaped by and against the structures that once confined him.

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