
Breaking Rooter Coop: Balram's Unconventional Journey towards Success in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

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Abstract:

Poverty is a recurring theme in literature across genres and periods, reflecting its pervasive impact on human lives and societies. Novelists like Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy use their novels to critique their time's social and economic systems, highlighting issues such as class inequality, industrialization, and the plight of people experiencing poverty. Their works often contain elements of sentimentality and melodrama, with a focus on moral redemption and social reform. Aravind Adiga is a prominent figure in contemporary Indian literature, acclaimed for his insightful portrayals of social and political realities in India. Since its publication in 2008, "The White Tiger" has garnered widespread acclaim and accolades, including the prestigious Man Booker Prize. The novel's unflinching portrayal of the underbelly of Indian society has sparked intense debate and discussion about class, corruption, and the pursuit of 'the Indian Dream.' "The White Tiger" resonates with readers worldwide, cementing its status as a modern classic of Indian literature.

"The White Tiger," penned by Adiga, uniquely portrays the protagonist from a lower working class due to its candid narrative voice, portrayal of an anti-hero protagonist, emphasis on ambition and agency, and incisive social commentary. Balram's story offers a fresh and provocative perspective on poverty, ambition, and morality, making it a standout work in contemporary literature. In "The White Tiger," the phrase "rooster coop" is used metaphorically by the protagonist, Balram Halwai, to describe the oppressive social and economic system that confines individuals to servitude and

exploitation. Balram reflects on the servitude of his family and neighbors in his village, likening them to "roosters in a coop" who are content to remain confined within the boundaries of their caste and social status. He expresses his desire to break free from the constraints of his upbringing and become a "white tiger" – a symbol of rebellion and individualism. The paper focuses on the protagonist's unconventional methods to climb up in society, breaking 'the rooster coop.'

Keywords: underbelly, corruption, rooster coop, anti-hero, ambition.

Aravind Adiga is a prominent figure in contemporary Indian literature, acclaimed for his insightful portrayals of social and political realities in India. Born in 1974 in Chennai, India, Adiga's upbringing and experiences have profoundly influenced his literary works, shaping his perspective on the complexities of Indian society. Throughout his career, Adiga has drawn inspiration from a diverse array of literary giants such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad (Polish-British), Fyodor Dostoevsky (Russia), R.K. Narayan, Arundhati Roy, Rohinton Mistry, and many as such who have left an indelible legacy through his impactful storytelling and thought-provoking narratives.

Born into a family of Indian descent, Adiga spent his formative years in various cities across India, including Mangalore and Mumbai. His multicultural background and exposure to the diverse landscapes of India have enriched his writing, providing him with a deep understanding of the country's intricate social fabric. Adiga's educational journey took him to prestigious institutions such as Columbia University and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he honed his literary skills and developed a keen interest in exploring themes of power, identity, and inequality.

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Poverty is a recurring theme in literature across genres and periods, reflecting its pervasive impact on human lives and societies. Poverty is not just a material condition but also has profound psychological and emotional effects on individuals. Literature delves into the psychological toll of poverty, exploring themes of shame, despair, resilience, and hope. Characters living in poverty often grapple with feelings of powerlessness, alienation, and self-doubt, adding depth and nuance to their portrayal.

Despite their hardships, characters living in poverty often demonstrate remarkable resilience and strength in the face of adversity, as in "Mayor of the Casterbridge" or "Tess" by Thomas Hardy. Literature celebrates the human spirit and resilience of individuals struggling against the odds, offering stories of survival, courage, and perseverance that inspire and uplift readers. By raising awareness of poverty and its consequences, literature can spark dialogue, empathy, and collective action toward addressing the root causes of poverty and creating a more just and equitable society. Such types of fiction were popular during the Victorian times by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy.

Dickens and Hardy primarily set their novels in Victorian England, a period marked by industrialization, urbanization, and widespread poverty. Their works reflect the social conditions and class divisions of the time, focusing on the struggles of the working class in rapidly changing societies. Adiga's novel "The White Tiger" is set in contemporary India, where poverty intersects with globalization, corruption, and rapid economic development. Adiga's portrayal of poverty reflects the complexities of modern Indian society, including the urban-rural divide, caste dynamics, and the impact of neo-liberal economic policies.

Dickens and Hardy often employ vivid characterizations to depict the plight of people experiencing poverty, creating memorable

protagonists who face adversity with resilience and fortitude. Characters like Oliver Twist, Pip, and Tess embody the struggles and injustices faced by the impoverished in Victorian society. While facing poverty and exploitation, Adiga's protagonist, Balram Halwai, differs in his portrayal as a morally complex anti-hero. Balram's narrative voice is cynical and irreverent, offering a sharp critique of modern India's social and economic inequalities perpetuating poverty. Unlike Dickens and Hardy's protagonists, Balram's actions are morally ambiguous, reflecting contemporary society's moral compromises and contradictions.

Dickens and Hardy use their novels to critique their time's social and economic systems, highlighting issues such as class inequality, industrialization, and the plight of people experiencing poverty. Their works often contain elements of sentimentality and melodrama, with a focus on moral redemption and social reform. Adiga's portrayal of poverty in "The White Tiger" is more explicitly political and satirical, offering a scathing critique of corruption, capitalism, and the enduring legacy of colonialism in India. Adiga's novel challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, privilege, and social justice in contemporary society without necessarily offering easy solutions or moral resolutions. Instead, it awakens the people in society.

"The White Tiger" uniquely portrays the protagonist from a lower working class due to its candid narrative voice, portrayal of an anti-hero protagonist, emphasis on ambition and agency, and incisive social commentary. Balram's story offers a fresh and provocative perspective on poverty, ambition, and morality, making it a standout work in contemporary literature.

Adiga has cited Fyodor Dostoevsky's exploration of moral dilemmas and existential themes as a significant influence on his writing. The Russian novelist's probing psychological insights and complex characters have inspired Adiga to delve deep into the inner lives of his protagonists. As a fellow Indian author, Arundhati Roy's bold and unapologetic approach to addressing social and political issues in her writing has resonated with Adiga. Her lyrical prose and fearless critique of power structures have served as a source of

inspiration for his own socially conscious narratives. Mistry's poignant depictions of Indian life and his exploration of themes such as identity, diaspora, and belonging have influenced Adiga's portrayal of similar themes in his work. Mistry's ability to capture the nuances of everyday existence in India has informed Adiga's approach to storytelling.

In "The White Tiger," the phrase "rooster coop" is used metaphorically by the protagonist, Balram Halwai, to describe the oppressive social and economic system that confines individuals to servitude and exploitation. In Chapter 1, Balram introduces the concept of the "rooster coop" early in the novel, describing how individuals in Indian society are like roosters trapped in a coop, unaware of their oppression. He explains that people are conditioned to accept their fate and conform to societal expectations without questioning or rebelling against the status quo.

In Chapter 2, Balram reflects on the fate of his father, who remained trapped in the "rooster coop" of poverty and servitude until his death. He contrasts his father's passive acceptance of his circumstances with his desire for freedom and self-determination.

In Chapter 4, Balram compares his family's poverty in Laxmangarh to the opulence of the Stork family in Delhi, highlighting the vast disparities between the rich and the poor in Indian society. He acknowledges that while the Storks live in luxury, they are still trapped in their version of the "rooster coop," albeit gilded.

In Chapter 6, Balram reflects on the servitude of his family and neighbors in Laxmangarh, likening them to "roosters in a coop" who are content to remain confined within the boundaries of their caste and social status. He expresses his desire to break free from the constraints of his upbringing and become a "white tiger" – a symbol of rebellion and individualism.

Balram Halwai's life is a compelling narrative of struggle, ambition, and rebellion against the oppressive social and economic structures of Indian society. Balram's character and moral integrity are shaped by a series of incidents and his exposure to corruption in various institutions within Indian society.

Early Life and Background:

Balram was born into poverty in the village of Laxmangarh,

where he grew up in a small, cramped dwelling with his family. His father works as a rickshaw puller, and Balram is expected to follow in his footsteps and continue the cycle of poverty and servitude. When Balram grows up in the rural village of Laxmangarh, he witnesses firsthand the injustices and inequalities of Indian society, whether in the school or Government hospital.

A Government Medical Superintendent is meant to check that doctors visit village hospitals like this. Now, each time the post falls vacant, the great socialist lets all the big doctors know that he is having an open auction for that post ...now imagine that I am a doctor. I borrow-borrowed the money and gave it to the great sociologist while touching his feet. He gives me the job. ...next, I called all the doctors and put one thing in my hand... work for some private hospital for the rest of the week. according to the ledger you've been there(49-50)

This experience highlights the pervasive nature of corruption in public institutions and its impact on ordinary people's lives. The corruption he witnesses in the hospital catalyzes Balram's growing awareness of the injustices and inequalities that permeate Indian society. It plants the seeds of skepticism and cynicism within him, prompting him to question the legitimacy of authority and the system's fairness. He observes the exploitation of the poor by wealthy landlords and the rigid caste system that perpetuates social hierarchies. Despite his humble beginnings, Despite the poverty and oppression he experiences, Balram maintains a sense of moral integrity and a desire for a better life.

Balram exhibits intelligence, resourcefulness, and ambition from a young age. He is determined to break free from his caste and social status limitations and achieve success on his terms.

Life with Ashok as a Driver:

Balram sees an opportunity for upward mobility when he is hired as a driver for Ashok and Pinky Madam, a wealthy couple from Delhi. Initially, he views this job as a means to escape the poverty and oppression of his village and improve his financial prospects. However, Balram soon realizes that his position as a driver only serves

to perpetuate his servitude and exploitation in a different form. He is subjected to the whims and demands of his employers, who treat him as little more than a disposable commodity. Despite the illusion of upward mobility, Balram remains ensnared within the confines of the "rooster coop." However, this exposes him to the corruption and moral decay among the upper classes. Balram complicates his employers' unethical practices, including bribery, tax evasion, and exploitation of their workers. He is initially conflicted but ultimately rationalizes his actions as necessary for survival.

Just look at the red bag, Balram –that is not stealing. I shook my head...See—Mr. Ashok is giving money to all these politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay. Moreover, who owns that tax in the end? Who? But the ordinary people of this country---you (244)

The Hit-and-Run Incident:

The hit-and-run incident involving Pinky Madam serves as a breaking point for Balram, crystallizing his disillusionment with the corrupt and oppressive system. When Ashok and Pinky Madam coerce Balram into taking the blame for the accident, he is confronted with the stark reality of his expendability in the eyes of the wealthy. This betrayal by his employers shatters any illusions Balram may have harbored about loyalty and morality within the upper classes. It triggers a profound moral crisis within him, forcing him to confront the ethical implications of his actions and the injustices inherent in the social hierarchy.

The hit-and-run incident ultimately catalyzes Balram's decision to break free from the confines of the "rooster coop" and assert his agency and autonomy. It represents a turning point in his life, marking his rebellion against the corrupt and oppressive forces that have controlled him for so long.

The cumulative effect of corruption in various institutions and experiences in Balram's life, from the rural government hospital to his employment with Ashok, ultimately leads to his moral awakening and rebellion against the status quo. These experiences contribute to his growing disillusionment with the system and his determination to forge his own path to freedom and self-realization.

Encounter with the Stork Family:

Balram's exposure to the Stork family, particularly Mr. Ashok's brother, Mukesh Stork, further reinforces his understanding of the pervasive corruption within Indian society. He witnesses the callous indifference of the wealthy elite towards the plight of the poor.

Balram becomes disillusioned with the false promises of upward mobility and success offered by the Stork family, realizing that actual change requires challenging the corrupt system rather than conforming to it. Thus, Balram's realization of his continued entrapment within the "rooster coop" sparks a rebellion within him. He becomes disillusioned with the passive acceptance of his circumstances and yearns for autonomy and agency over his life. Balram's rebellion manifests in various forms, including his decision to murder Ashok and flee with a large sum of money, symbolizing his rejection of the submissive role assigned to him by society. This act of defiance marks a turning point in Balram's journey as he takes control of his destiny and asserts his independence.

Murdering his Master :

The pivotal moment in Balram's moral development occurs when he murders Mr. Ashok in rage and desperation. This act represents the culmination of his disillusionment with the corrupt and oppressive system that has exploited him for so long. While walking in Delhi, Balram's fears come in his father's voice through a buffalo. As Dhawan says in his introduction to *Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger: A Symposium of Critical Response*:

The hallucinations developed the urge for murder in Balaram: he stopped having any soft corner for Ashok, who was now just a representative of the master class, the rich, brute oppressors. The conversation between Ashok and his girlfriend Uma, who repeatedly asked him to replace the created insecurity in Balram's mind and prompted him to take rapid action(21)

While the murder itself is morally reprehensible, it symbolizes Balram's rejection of the passive acceptance of his fate and his assertion of agency and autonomy.

The rich are always one step ahead of us –aren't they?

Well, not this time. For every step he would take, two(268)

Entrepreneurial Journey:

Following his escape, Balram embarks on a journey to establish himself as an entrepreneur in Bangalore. He uses the stolen money to start his own taxi business, demonstrating his resourcefulness and ambition in the face of adversity. Balram's entrepreneurial endeavors represent his quest for autonomy and self-determination. He refuses to be confined by the limitations imposed upon him by society and instead forges his path to success. This marks a turning point as he takes control of his destiny and asserts his independence. Balram's success as an entrepreneur reflects his resilience and determination to overcome the societal barriers that have oppressed him. Despite his morally dubious actions, he ultimately strives to create a better life for himself on his terms.

Balram's life is characterized by his rejection of the passive acceptance of the "rooster coop" mentality and his relentless pursuit of autonomy, agency, and self-realization. His decision to become a driver initially appears to offer upward mobility, but he soon realizes that he remains ensnared within the same system of exploitation and servitude. Through rebellion and entrepreneurship, Balram ultimately breaks free from the "rooster coop" constraints and asserts his autonomy in defiance of societal expectations.

Balram's transformation from a lowly servant to a successful entrepreneur symbolizes hope and aspiration for the exploited poor. Through these incidents, Balram's character transforms from a passive victim of corruption and oppression to a proactive agent of change. His journey highlights the moral complexities and contradictions inherent in navigating a corrupt and unjust society, ultimately challenging readers to confront their beliefs about morality and integrity.

His story inspires others to question the limitations imposed upon them by society and to strive for a better future. Balram's rebellion against the oppressive forces of poverty, corruption, and social hierarchy embodies the resilience and determination of the "small bellies" to defy their circumstances and assert their humanity. In "The White Tiger," Aravind Adiga employs various binaries to

highlight the economic disparity and social stratification prevalent in Indian society. These binaries serve as symbolic contrasts that underscore the stark differences between the privileged and the marginalized.

The Rich and the Poor: The binaries of over-weight and underweight are artistically presented in various ways. One is as follows:

Do the dreams of the rich and the poor never overlap, do they? See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich, and what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like people with low incomes (225)

In another one, the rich man's body is pictured by the side of the rigid body of the poor:

The rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank .ours are different. My father's spine was knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells:... the story of the poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen(26-27)

Rural-Urban Divide:

Adiga explores the contrast between rural and urban life, portraying the rural villages as emblematic of poverty, backwardness, and traditional values, while the urban centers represent wealth, modernity, and opportunity. Balram's journey from his impoverished village to the bustling city of Delhi underscores the socioeconomic disparities between rural and urban areas.

Light India vs Dark India:

Adiga employs the metaphor of "Light India" and "Dark India" to symbolize the divide between the affluent, privileged classes and the impoverished, marginalized masses. "Light India" represents the glittering facade of economic prosperity and progress the elite enjoys. At the same time, "Dark India" symbolizes the grim reality of poverty, corruption, and exploitation faced by most of the population.

Big Bellies vs Small Bellies:

Adiga introduces the concept of "big bellies" and "small bellies" to delineate between the wealthy, powerful elite (big bellies) and the impoverished, marginalized underclass (tiny bellies). The "big

bellies" metaphor signifies those with access to abundance, luxury, and excess. In contrast, "small bellies" represent those who struggle to eke out a meager existence on the fringes of society. Adiga writes thus:

Those who were the most ferocious and hungriest had eaten everyone else up and grown big bellies. That was all that counted now, the size of your belly. It did not matter whether you were a woman, a Muslim, or an untouchable: anyone with a belly could rise. My father's father must have been a real Halwai, a sweetmaker, but when he inherited the shop, a member of some other caste must have stolen it from him with the help of the police. My father did not have the belly to fight back. That is why he had fallen to the mud, to the level of a rickshaw-puller. That is why I was cheated of my destiny to be fat, creamy-skinned, and smiling. To sum up, there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: men with big bellies and men with tiny bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up(64)

Employer-Employee Divide:

Another binary Adiga explores the relationship between employers and employees, particularly in the context of class exploitation. Characters like Balram, who work as drivers or servants for wealthy employers, are subjected to exploitation, mistreatment, and servitude, highlighting the power dynamics inherent in employer-employee relationships.

Formal Economy vs Informal Economy:

Adiga contrasts the formal economy, characterized by legitimate businesses, corporate offices, and government institutions, with the informal economy, which encompasses informal labor, street vendors, and illicit activities. Characters like Balram navigate between these two worlds, highlighting the precariousness and instability of informal employment in contrast to the stability and security offered by the formal sector.

Education Divide:

Adiga also explores the disparity in access to education, with characters from privileged backgrounds having access to quality

education and opportunities for advancement. In contrast, those from impoverished backgrounds are denied educational opportunities and trapped in a cycle of poverty. The education divide perpetuates social inequality and limits upward mobility for the marginalized.

These binaries in "The White Tiger" serve to underscore the economic disparity and social injustice prevalent in Indian society, shedding light on the systemic barriers that perpetuate inequality and exploitation. Adiga's exploration of these themes invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, privilege, and social mobility in contemporary India.

"The White Tiger" by Aravind Adiga is deeply influenced by India's contemporary social, political, and economic conditions. These conditions serve as the backdrop against which the novel's themes of inequality, corruption, and social mobility are explored. Here is how these influences manifest in the novel:

Social Inequality:

Adiga portrays the stark divide between the rich and the poor in Indian society, highlighting the pervasive social inequality. Balram's journey from a rural village to the bustling metropolis of Delhi exposes the vast disparities in wealth, opportunity, and quality of life experienced by different segments of society.

The novel underscores how the rigid caste system and social hierarchies perpetuate inequality and limit upward mobility for those born into lower castes or impoverished backgrounds. Balram's struggle to escape the confines of his social status reflects the broader challenges faced by the marginalized and disenfranchised in Indian society. It intersects with the Hindu religion.

Do you know about Hanuman, sir? He was a faithful servant of the God Rama.... He is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion. These are the kind of Gods foisted on us. Mr.Jiambo. Understand now how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India (19)
In the early part, Balram felt it was difficult to break the rooster coop.

Political Corruption:

"The White Tiger" exposes the rampant corruption within India's political and bureaucratic institutions, exacerbating social

inequality and impedes progress. Balram's employers, such as Ashok and his family, wield power and influence through their connections with politicians and government officials, engaging in bribery, tax evasion, and exploitation with impunity.

Adiga critiques the collusion between the political elite and the business class, illustrating how corruption permeates all levels of society and undermines democratic principles. The novel's portrayal of political corruption serves as a commentary on the failures of governance and the erosion of public trust in India's democratic institutions.

Economic Disparity:

Economic disparity is a central theme in "The White Tiger," with Adiga depicting the struggles of the working class against the backdrop of India's rapid economic growth. Balram's experiences as a driver for wealthy elites expose him to the excesses of consumerism and capitalism, highlighting the disparities in wealth distribution and access to opportunity.

The novel critiques the neoliberal economic policies prioritizing economic growth at the expense of social welfare, exacerbating income inequality and widening the gap between the rich and the poor. Balram's entrepreneurial ambitions reflect the aspirations of many marginalized individuals seeking to improve their economic prospects in a rapidly changing society.

Cultural Transformation:

Adiga explores the impact of globalization and modernization on traditional Indian culture and values. Balram's journey from the rural hinterlands to the urban centers reflects the shifting cultural landscape of contemporary India, where traditional customs and values are often overshadowed by materialism and Western influences.

The novel reflects on the tension between tradition and modernity as characters grapple with the pressures of societal expectations and the allure of Western lifestyles. Balram's embrace of individualism and ambition symbolizes a broader cultural shift towards self-determination and autonomy.

"The White Tiger" is deeply rooted in contemporary India's

socio-political and economic realities, offering a scathing critique of the inequalities, corruption, and cultural transformations shaping the nation. Adiga's novel serves as a powerful commentary on the challenges and contradictions of modern Indian society, inviting readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, privilege, and social justice.

The protagonist changes into an antagonist to climb up in life. Here he becomes the symbol of the poor like him who want to revolt against the system in a way they can in a short-cut method to become rich. The metaphor, "rooster coop," thus plays an essential role in the novel. Balram's understanding of the "rooster coop" mentality profoundly influences his life and serves as a catalyst for his journey to liberation and self-realization in several ways:

Awareness of Oppression:

Balram recognizes early on that he and others like him are trapped within the "rooster coop" of poverty, servitude, and societal expectations. He understands they are conditioned to accept their fate and remain obedient to their masters, much like roosters confined in a coop. This awareness motivates him to seek a way out of this oppressive system.

Desire for Autonomy:

Balram's understanding of the "rooster coop" fuels his desire for autonomy and agency. He refuses to accept his predetermined role as a servant and dreams of breaking free from the constraints of his social and economic status. This desire for autonomy becomes the driving force behind his actions and decisions throughout the novel.

Rejection of Passivity:

Unlike many others trapped in the "rooster coop," Balram refuses to accept his fate passively. He rejects the passive resignation and subservience that characterize life within the coop and instead chooses to take control of his destiny. He understands that true liberation requires active resistance and defiance against the oppressive forces that seek to keep him confined.

Embrace of Cunning and Ambition:

Balram recognizes that survival within the "rooster coop" requires cunning, resourcefulness, and a willingness to exploit others.

He embraces these qualities as tools for navigating the corrupt and cutthroat world around him. His pursuit of autonomy and agency is intricately linked to his willingness to embrace his own cunning and ambition, even if it means resorting to unethical means.

Transformation into the "White Tiger":

As Balram evolves from a subservient servant to a cunning entrepreneur, he embodies the metaphor of the "white tiger" – a rare and powerful creature capable of transcending the confines of the "rooster coop." His journey to becoming the "white tiger" represents his rejection of the passive mindset of the "rooster coop" and his embrace of autonomy, agency, and individualism.

Thus, Balram's understanding of the "rooster coop" is a critical lens through which he views the world and shapes his actions. It fuels his desire for autonomy, motivates his rejection of passivity, and ultimately drives his transformation into the "white tiger" – a symbol of rebellion, ambition, and self-realization.

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