

The Failure of the Class System in India: A Study through the White Tiger

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Abstract—This paper explores the failure of India's class system as represented in Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008). Using sociological and postcolonial theory, it argues that Adiga depicts class hierarchy as a failing system—one that sustains inequality, moral corruption, and institutional decay. The novel's protagonist, Balram Halwai, embodies both the victim and the product of systemic injustice, revealing how ambition, exploitation, and violence intertwine in a neoliberal context. The analysis demonstrates that the Indian class system fails not only economically but morally and institutionally, eroding the ethical foundations of society and exposing the contradictions of modern India.

Index Terms—inequality, postcolonial theory, exploitation, violence, contradictions

I. INTRODUCTION

India's class and caste structures have historically defined social relations, determining access to power, privilege, and opportunity. In Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger*, these hierarchies are dissected with brutal honesty. The novel portrays a nation where economic liberalization and modernization have intensified inequality rather than diminished it. Through Balram Halwai's ascent from a village servant to a self-made entrepreneur, Adiga exposes the injustice of a system that rewards corruption and punishes honesty. This study analyzes how the class system in India fails structurally and morally, drawing insights from sociological and postcolonial frameworks.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the class system in India requires integrating sociological and literary approaches. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social, cultural, and economic capital illuminate how

inequality persists despite apparent modernization (Bourdieu, 1984). Similarly, Indian scholars such as M. N. Srinivas and B. R. Ambedkar demonstrate that caste-based hierarchies continue to shape class identity in modern India. In literature, postcolonial theory provides a critical lens to analyze how narratives of globalization and progress obscure persistent oppression (Khilnani, 1997). These frameworks collectively reveal how Adiga's fiction critiques the myth of meritocracy and exposes structural inequality.

III. THE COLLAPSE OF MORAL LEGITIMACY

One of the most striking aspects of Adiga's narrative is the moral decay of the upper classes. Balram's employers, the Ashok family, cloak their exploitation in liberal rhetoric and philanthropy, yet their behavior reflects deep hypocrisy. The master-servant dynamic symbolizes a moral void: servants are dehumanized, and their labor sustains the wealth of their oppressors. Adiga (2008) depicts this as the 'Rooster Coop'—a metaphor for the psychological conditioning that prevents the poor from rebelling. The ruling class's moral failure contributes to the breakdown of ethical legitimacy within the social order.

IV. INSTITUTIONAL FAILURE AND CORRUPTION

Adiga's India is a society where institutions—legal, political, and bureaucratic—serve the interests of the powerful. The police protect the wealthy, elections are manipulated, and the judiciary is corrupt. When Balram's employer accidentally kills a child, the family coerces Balram to take the blame. Such incidents reveal how institutions meant to uphold justice perpetuate inequality. This aligns with Ambedkar's (1936) assertion that social and legal

institutions in India reinforce hierarchical power relations rather than dismantle them. The novel thus reflects the broader failure of governance in a postcolonial capitalist framework.

V. THE MYTH OF MERITOCRACY IN NEOLIBERAL INDIA

The White Tiger situates its critique within neoliberal India—a world of outsourcing, technology parks, and booming entrepreneurship. Yet Adiga dismantles the illusion of equal opportunity. Balram's rise depends not on merit but on manipulation, violence, and betrayal. His transformation into a successful businessman mirrors the moral compromises demanded by neoliberal capitalism. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, the ideology of meritocracy conceals the reproduction of privilege. Adiga dramatizes this through Balram's realization that honesty and servitude yield no reward; only rebellion and cunning ensure survival.

VI. EVERYDAY VIOLENCE AND STRUCTURAL OPPRESSION

Violence in The White Tiger is both physical and structural. Servants are beaten, humiliated, and denied dignity, while systemic violence manifests through poverty and lack of education. Adiga normalizes this violence as part of daily life—reflecting a society desensitized to oppression. Balram's act of murder is not merely personal vengeance but a symbolic revolt against systemic injustice. The novel thereby suggests that violence becomes inevitable in a society where justice and equality are unattainable.

VII. MORAL COMPROMISE AND THE COST OF MOBILITY

Balram's journey from servitude to entrepreneurship represents both success and moral degradation. His ascent exposes the paradox of modern India: progress achieved through ethical collapse. Adiga's critique is not directed merely at individuals but at the socio-economic order that compels moral compromise. The failure of the class system is thus not only material but spiritual—undermining empathy, solidarity, and collective ethics.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger exposes the moral and institutional failure of India's class system. Through Balram's narrative, Adiga portrays how globalization and neoliberalism deepen historical inequalities and corrode ethical foundations. The novel reveals that when the structures of justice and opportunity fail, individuals must either submit or rebel—often at great moral cost. The story stands as both social commentary and warning, urging readers to confront the ethical crisis underpinning economic success. The failure of the class system in India, as Adiga demonstrates, lies in its inability to reconcile growth with justice, freedom with equality, and ambition with morality.

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