



Critical Study Of Social Inequality In Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical study of social inequality in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. It examines how caste, class, neoliberal reform, and spatial segregation intersect to structure the life trajectory of the protagonist, Balram Halwai. The study adopts a Critical Interpretive Synthesis approach with an interdisciplinary review of scholarship in subaltern studies, political economy, and postcolonial urban theory. This method enables a multi-layered analysis of inequality as a social, economic, and spatial formation rather than an individual misfortune or purely moral problem. The article identifies four interrelated thematic formations in the novel: caste and class intersectionality, neoliberal precarity, spatial inequality, and subaltern agency. It argues that Balram's narrative voice exposes the limits of neoliberal meritocracy, since his rise depends on corruption, violence, and the reproduction of exploitative structures. The rural "Darkness" and urban "Light" are interpreted as spatial regimes that organize access to opportunity and participation in India's post-liberalisation economy. Balram's transformation from servant to entrepreneur is read as a form of compromised subaltern agency that both appropriates and critiques neoliberal values. By synthesising theoretical and contextual work with textual analysis, the article shows how *The White Tiger* stages a systemic critique of contemporary Indian modernity. It positions the novel as a key text for understanding how literary form engages with the lived experience of inequality in the Global South. The study also proposes a structural framework that can be adapted to the analysis of other postcolonial fictions concerned with capitalism, caste, and urban transformation.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, social inequality, neo-liberalism, subalternity

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* has become one of the key texts in contemporary Indian English fiction because it reveals the structures that perpetuate inequality in post-liberalisation India. The first few decades of the twenty-first century were characterized by large gains in GDP and growing urban economies, but scholars believe that these did not lead to widespread improvements in welfare or social mobility. Dreze and Sen (2013) show that although liberalisation created new opportunities for some groups of people, it also worsened inequalities. The conditions on which Balram's fate is forged are an expression of these contradictions on the national level because his dreams arise in economic frameworks that provide the rhetoric of mobility, yet at the same time perpetuate forms of deep exclusion. Through its first-person narrative, the novel expresses the neoliberal reform intersecting with older social formations through which identity and possibility continued to be regulated. This wider socio-political context provides an important background for the novel's representation of inequality as a systemic phenomenon rather than a set of individual hardships.

The central problem dealt with in the present study is the fragmentation that characterises existing criticism of *The White Tiger*. Literary analyses tend to prioritize the ethical aspects of the novel, to reduce Balram's violence as an individual moral failure or as an assertive violation of authority. These interpretations have the tendency to isolate character from structure. Studies in postcolonial literary criticism recognise the novel's play with the theme of marginalisation but have tended to focus on identity and representation, and have neglected to integrate the socio-economic conditions that inform the protagonist's choices. On the other

hand, scholarship in the fields of sociology and political economy pays attention to inequality in India but has little to do with literary texts as interpretive sites of social knowledge. This division restricts the ability of existing work to deal with the complexity of inequality in the novel. A more integrated approach is needed that brings together literary criticism and theories on caste, neoliberal governance, and spatial inequality. The present study responds to this gap by synthesising the interdisciplinary perspectives in order to analyse how Adiga presents inequality as a multi-layered and interdependent structure.

The literature on *The White Tiger* itself reveals different interpretive trajectories but does not often synthesise these. Nayar (2016) locates the novel in a much wider tradition of Indian English fiction, critiquing neoliberal modernity and foregrounding marginalised experiences, although he again tends to be more thematic than structural in his discussion. Punter (2000) emphasizes the opening up of the promises of global capitalism by contemporary postcolonial novels through the use of narrative fragmentation and satire. His analysis gives a useful account of narrative technique but fails to relate it closely to the political economy that underlies the text. These contributions are very insightful, and they are discipline-specific. What is absent is an approach which explicitly incorporates the theories of subalternity, neoliberal governance, urban informality, and caste stratification to examine how these intersecting structures affect the journey of the protagonist. The gap in the current scholarship regarding the lack of such an integrated account is what makes the present study worthy.

This review creates a theoretically driven interpretation of inequality in *The White Tiger*. Drawing on the study of the novel from literary, sociological, political, economic, and urban geographic perspectives. Rather than depend upon individual or moralistic interpretations, the analysis reveals how the text presents the problem of inequality as a systemic formation that is reproduced through social reproduction, spatial segregation, and the economic logics of neoliberal reform. It shows the value of literary fiction as a source of socio-political insight and makes a contribution to interdisciplinary work on inequality in the Global South. Overall, the article provides a model of a structural approach to understanding the interpretation of the lived realities of inequality in rapidly transforming societies by literature.

Objectives of the Study

1. To analyse the representation of social inequality in *The White Tiger* using the lens of caste, class, neoliberalism, and spatial inequality.
2. To synthesize existing literature around neoliberalism, caste and urban inequality, and merge these into a comprehensive model of inequality in the novel.
3. To investigate the way in which the narrative reflects systemic social inequalities.

Design of the Study

This study assumes a qualitative research design, which is based on Critical Interpretive Synthesis. CIS is suited to reviews which attempt interpretive theorisation as opposed to an aggregative summary of findings (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006). CIS permits iterative engagement with several different materials, including literary criticism, sociological analyses, and theoretical work on the novel. This structure allows the reviewer to follow the intersections made by constructs in Adiga's narrative and to construct a multi-scalar understanding of societies of inequality at individual, social, and institutional levels.

Thematic Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was iterative and consistent with CIS. The review started with scoping the literature and developing the objectives more as preliminary themes emerged. Selected sources were coded for key concepts, arguments, and theoretical orientations. The material extracted was classified into thematic categories. The synthesis phase consisted of relating these categories to model the way inequality works across the novel. The last part brought these insights together into a comprehensive account of inequality as a structural, spatial, and ideological system in *The White Tiger*.

Emerging Themes

Class Intersectionality of Caste and Class

The intersection of caste and class is a key to systemic inequality as depicted in *The White Tiger*. Balram's life is affected by a double weight of caste-based discrimination and class-based exploitation, which limits the opportunities available to him as part of the urban class. According to Jodhka (2015), caste is still a hard line in present-day India, and it plays the role of deciding one's social position, irrespective of talent and merit. In the novel, caste is used to mark each stage of Balram's life, from his childhood as a halwai in a poor rural family to his days later as a chauffeur in the city. This pattern is consistent with Dreze and Sen's (2013) analysis of everlasting social inequalities in India despite economic reform. Balram's experience shows how caste acts as an invisible yet powerful barrier to mobility, despite the promises of neoliberalism with market opportunity. His journey from village servant to urban chauffeur describes the interplay between caste and class in how they determine social worth and class as rural labour, and determine exit options. The novel thus

critiques the phenomenon of neoliberalism by demonstrating that meritocracy is a largely illusory goal for people at the bottom, particularly for subjects who are forced to go through a corrupt system to get upward.

Neoliberal Precarity

From Harvey's (2005) perspective, neoliberal reforms are a reconfiguring of the relationship between individual agency and economic opportunity. They advocate for universal accessibility to mobility and exacerbate inequality. In *The White Tiger*, the story of Balram's journey is a metaphor for the precarity of lower-class subjects in neoliberal capitalism. Balram's migration from a rural village to the urban world is cast in terms of the characters attempting to escape the oppressive conditions, but the urban "Light" fails to deliver the liberation it promises. He finds a different but no less embedded system of inequality in which to be successful, to succeed, one must actively participate in exploitation. Harvey's (2005) concept of neoliberal governmentality helps to explain how Balram internalises capitalist logics of reproduction of the inequalities that he would like to overcome. The novel, therefore, presents neoliberalism as creating a moral vacuum, in which individuals like Balram take up exploitative practices as strategies of survival in a system that prioritises individual success over the good of the collective.

Spatial Inequality

Spatial inequality in *The White Tiger* comes to be seen as both structural and ideological, and the way that lives are lived between rural deprivation and urban opportunity. Roy (2010) reveals how processes of neoliberal urbanisation in India have resulted in hyper-segregated cities with elites in secure enclaves and the poor being relegated to informal and marginal spaces. In the novel, the rural-urban divide is not only physical movement from the "Darkness" to the "Light". It symbolises inequality of access to mobility in modern India. Roy (2010) argues that the "Light" of the city is not really accessible to the poor because the social exclusion, informality, and weak institutional support mean that they remain vulnerable. Urbanisation is a double-edged process that offers an opportunity and, at the same time, reproduces inequality in terms of economic and social exclusion.

Subaltern Agency

The subaltern agency of Balram is one of the most provocative parts of the novel. As Spivak (1988) says, such agency results from the need to assert power in an oppressive system. Balram's violent acts can be interpreted as tactics of assertion of agency within a regime of social exclusion. Yet this is not an agency that is celebrated as a clear moral victory. It is projected as a compromise that shows desperation and survival modes of the subaltern subject. Spivak's (1988) account of subaltern agency is useful in understanding the function of Balram's violence as resistance and tragic reproduction of the system he would like to leave. Harvey's (2005) notion of neoliberal governmentality further enlightens his transformation into an entrepreneurial self. This transformation is more of a revolt against autonomy than a victory for it. The self-assertive actions of Balram are still determined by the economic logic that oppresses him. The paradox brings into the foreground the moral ambiguity of neoliberal subjectivity.

The thematic findings, which are supported by theoretical frameworks, explain how the novel critiques the structures of power as well as the moral compromises needed to navigate them. The neoliberal critique fused with the issues of spatial inequality and subaltern resistance not only helps us to understand the novel better but also enriches the discourse on contemporary inequality in post-liberalisation India.

Table 1. Themes Summary Table

Thematic Category	Key Findings	Source(s)
Caste and Class Intersectionality	Caste remains a rigid boundary limiting social mobility, shaping perceptions of self-worth, and perpetuating inequality.	Jodhka (2015), Drèze & Sen (2013)
Neoliberal Precarity	Neoliberal reforms exacerbate exploitation, leading to precarious labor markets where upward mobility relies on corruption and manipulation.	Harvey (2005)
Spatial Inequality	Rural-urban divide is marked by stark inequalities, with rural areas offering few opportunities compared to the urban elite's "Light."	Roy (2010)
Subaltern Agency	Balram's violent agency reflects the complex interplay of subaltern resistance and reproduction of the very systems of oppression he seeks to escape.	Spivak (1988), Harvey (2005)

Interpretive Synthesis

The findings highlight the interaction of caste-based oppression, neoliberal capitalism, and spatial segregation in the protagonist Balram Halwai's journey that ultimately exposes the neoliberal model of social mobility's inherent contradictions. Applying these frameworks to Adiga's narrative, this paper offers a nuanced critique of the ways in which inequality is perpetuated and reproduced in post-liberalisation India.

Subaltern Agency: Navigating Neoliberalism

Balram's voice, as expressed through his letter to the Premier, is central to the story of subaltern resistance in *The White Tiger*. His first-person account contests the hegemonic power structures that work to marginalise lower caste people, aligning with Spivak's (1988) idea that the subaltern, even though they are silenced, resist and find a way to speak. However, the novel complicates Spivak's framework by revealing that Balram's resistance is not one of sheer rebellion, but of manipulation of the very structures that oppress him. Balram's passage from a rural servant to a self-made business owner is presented as a triumph of neoliberalism's meritocratic ideology while also being a reaction to a system that forces Balram to adopt exploitative practices to survive. This nuanced interpretation builds upon the concept of mimicry developed by Bhabha (1994), which implies that the subaltern subject adopts the practices and ideologies of the colonizer or the dominant class not to subvert them, but to survive within them. Balram does not resist the neoliberal system directly; he appropriates it, making himself a product of the system while at the same time critiquing it. This is consistent with Chakrabarty's (2000) view of subalternity not only as a matter of resistance, but also a matter of adapting to the constraints that are imposed by societal structures. In Balram's case, his moral compromise is the way he gets a job in a system that rewards individual success at the cost of others. His journey highlights the paradox of neoliberalism, where freedom and self-interest co-exist with systemic exploitation.

Neoliberal Precarity: The Illusion of Meritocracy

The analysis of the precarity of neoliberalism in the study uncovers the role played by the neoliberal economic reforms in the perpetuation of the illusion of meritocracy in India. While the promises of neoliberalism are of equal opportunity and upward mobility, it tends to increase inequality through the creation of precarious labor markets and the reinforcement of structural exploitation. Balram's ascendance to success is not based on individual merit but on the manipulation of corrupt systems, which typifies Harvey's (2005) critique of neoliberalism, which states that market-driven reforms only exacerbate economic inequalities rather than solve them. Balram's experience is also consistent with Fraser's (2019) concept of neoliberal precarity, which also posits that neoliberalism is conducive to greater inequality by placing the burden of success and failure on the individual at the same time as it dismantles social safety nets and creates greater economic precarity for marginalized populations. Balram's journey is one of the moral and economic contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, where success is attained only by those with the capacity to exploit the very systems that are supposed to offer the opportunity. The story makes the point about the folly of meritocratic ideals, that economic success can often depend on violence, manipulation, and putting others down. This finding is similar to that of Piketty (2014) in his analysis of the neoliberal economy, which does sustain a widening wealth gap and rewards capital accumulation through the exploitation of labor, not innovation or hard work.

Spatial Inequality: Rural "Darkness" vs. Urban "Light"

The theme of spatial inequality is represented by the rural-urban divide represented by the novel's "Darkness" and "Light". Balram's journey from rural poverty to urban servitude brings into focus the spatial dimensions of economic inequality, where access to economic opportunity is determined very much by one's physical and social location. As pointed out by Roy (2010), the process of neoliberal urbanization frequently leads to informality and exclusion processes, the poor being relegated to marginalized spaces within the city and excluded from the economic benefits that are enjoyed by the wealthy. The novel comments on the myth of the neoliberal city as a place of freedom, demonstrating how the urban "Light" does not provide any meaningful escape from the exploitation of the rural poor. The urban environment in *The White Tiger* replicates the spatial divisions introduced by Sassen (2014), whereby cities, although the epicenters of economic activity, are also places of spatial segregation where the poor are excluded from the benefits of economic growth and urbanization. In the case of Balram, his migration to the economic life of the urban slums illustrates how the city is a place of exclusion, a place of informal labor and precarious living conditions.

Intersections and Systemic Inequality

The interplay of subaltern agency, neoliberal precariousness, and spatial inequality amounts to a critique of neoliberal India on a systemic level. The novel is an attack not just on the neoliberal myth of meritocracy, but also on the spatial and economic configurations that ensure inequality. The result of this research highlights the fact that economic, social, and spatial factors are inextricably linked, and these aspects influence the lives of those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Through the character of Balram, Adiga analyses the moral decay inherent in neoliberalism, demonstrating that to succeed in the neoliberal system, one is often forced to adopt exploitative practices that perpetuate the very inequalities that neoliberalism aims to

eliminate. This systemic critique is aligned with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of capital and habitus, which suggests that it is not only individual effort that determines social mobility and that the accumulation of cultural, social, and economic capital within a person's background is what shapes their mobility. In the case of Balram, his journey is the limit of neoliberalism in providing true social mobility. His success does not consist in overcoming inequality but rather in fitting in with a system that rewards moral compromise, self-interest, and exploitation. Adiga's novel, therefore, draws attention to the myths of neoliberalism, especially its promise to democratize opportunity and provide a way to success for all, irrespective of their background.

Conclusion

This study has critically analyzed the representation of social inequality in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga by using subaltern theory, neoliberal precarity, and spatial inequality as the theoretical frameworks of study. The findings highlight the ways in which Adiga's depiction of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, speaks to the complex ways caste, class, and neoliberal capitalism intersect and shows that upward mobility in modern-day India is not simply the result of individual effort but a consequence of systemic exploitation and structural inequality. The subaltern voice of Balram's story emphasizes the moral ambiguity of neoliberalism and the need for compromise and manipulation in order to achieve personal success. By examining Balram's journey from rural servitude to urban entrepreneurship, this study examines the neoliberal myth of meritocracy, which shows how the system is rewarding self-interest and moral compromise instead of merit. Moreover, the rural-urban divide in the novel illuminates the spatial inequalities that remain both stark and persistent in the novel, as it reveals how the disparities of access to opportunity to the marginalized remain. Adiga's novel defies the neoliberal discourse of opportunities and equality and reveals the deeply embedded barriers that prevent any real social mobility for the subaltern subjects. This analysis is part of larger debates about inequality in post-liberalization India, which calls for a more equitable and just society that is beyond the confines of neoliberal capitalism.

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