

# Countenance of Indian Individualism in Aravindadiga's The White Tiger

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## Abstract

*The present paper discusses Indian individualism as being supported by a democratic and secular society but also systemized by traditions and socioeconomic realities which keep most of the Indians living in poverty. In his thought-provoking novel The White Tiger, Aravind Adiga challenges Indian culture to create a society in which individuals are truly free. The paper argues that the relevance of Adiga's novel is that, it is social structure and practices of hierarchy keep many people in the lower classes of Indian society and that this state of affairs is counterproductive. Instead, Adiga's novel suggests that the situation of India's social structure and its entrenched hierarchy would have to be looked at and that through the erasure of constraint by society's class hierarchy Indian society could transform itself.*

**Keywords: Individualism, democratic, hierarchy, transform**

Aravind Adiga is one of the prolific Indian authors who expound contemporary Indian perspectives in his thought-provoking novels like *Between the Assassinations* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011). Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* unfolds in the Darkness, a very suggestive name for an anonymous Indian village. The protagonist Balram Halwai has the misfortune of being born in a teeming poor family in the midst of this Darkness and under the control of feudal lords caricatured like characters from 'Beastly Tales.' The young Balram can foresee his future in the thin, lean, emaciated, diseased figures of the village men but he is a White Tiger, he talks about finding ways to escape from the rural cesspool.

Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* challenges definitions of Indian identity with a narrator who comes from a nameless and birthday-less past with a written fate as a member of the lower caste. The servant rises in power by using the very nothingness he comes from as an advantage and addresses his agenda to China's premier. The narrator becomes something in not only Indian but also global society under the symbolic pseudonym of *The White Tiger* as he appeals to China and speaks with understanding of the United States and world economies. Despite a lack of formal education, he knows multiple religions and languages as well. The fact that the narrator is also a murderer is not excusable but shows the reader that them Brasure of nothingness in India is not fully possible at this time. Therefore, Adiga is both asking Indians to veer away from their fated paths while also changing economic, political, and social policies.

There must be a way for individuals within society to seek redefinition through both lawful and ethically correct means. The concept of an empowering nothingness is an inherent concept of literary deconstruction in Jacques Derrida's "Différance." Derrida's play on the French different, meaning both "to differ" and "to defer," allows for a link in "signify [ying] nonidentity" and "the order of the same" (385). The difference with an "a" becomes a philosophy rather than a simple word.

The neologism "indicates the middle voice"(385), thereby asking the reader to allow dissonant suspensions of known truths defined by societies. Individuals' free will is not just an action here, but a state of being and the ability to change what one's being is defined as. Non-identity becomes a form of empowerment. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga is first defined through non-identity by the fact that he has "never been given a name"(10) nor "know[n] his exact age" (12). He has always been called "Munna," or "boy," which his teacher claims is "not a real name" and subsequently names him "Balram ... the sidekick of the god Krishna" (10-11). Although there is consideration through the novel of the narrator's place in society that is dependent on his position in India's caste system, his lack of name challenges a strict fate through its potential for mutability. The teacher already challenges the notion that we are born into identities by labeling Munna with the new name of Balram and tells Balram that his name is Krishna, there for replacing Balram as his "sidekick" in the classroom.

The new name may be a step up from "boy" in the hierarchy, but a "sidekick" is not only below another by definition but also at the mercy of the other's fate."Balram" is an elevated status of a name with less freedom of identity. However, Balram's father seems to have no care what his son is called: "If it's what he wants, then we'll call you that" (11). He does not attempt to design Balram's fate, and we are suddenly aware that the narrator need not be caught in the continuous cycle of father and son that dominates class definitions worldwide.

As some of the schoolboys come around and poke fun at him, Balram states twice "I said nothing" (32). He is coming closer to an awareness that he is not satisfied with his position in society and that

an internal change, rather than a voiced response to the boys, is necessary to leave. He is frustrated throughout the novel with his "half-baked" education with "half-formed ideas"(8) when seeks knowledge and later "feel(s) a kind of electricity buzzing up" when he is "standing around books" (175). Woolf similarly struggles as her thoughts are eaten up by the guards of the university while she attempts to allow her mind to wander. Although she uses the metaphor of catching a fish for discovering an idea to evoke, "the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line" (5), her "little fish" is sent "into hiding" (6).

On the traditional male campus, she is cut off from individual freedom. Balram's knowledge gained in school is sent into hiding when he is first asked to break coal and later when he is given a full-time position as a chauffeur. However, his fluency in English, ability to start his own company with the money he steals, knowledge of religions, and understanding of both foreign nations of China and the U.S. are all demonstrated throughout the novel and show the reader that any of the hundreds of millions of Indians who are "half-baked" by education may nonetheless carry great intelligence within them. Balram has found his way similarly into money from a "bottom caste" in which he was taught to ask for "absolutely nothing" in payment from his employer (55).

The lack of entitlement to money is a significance rather than a void. Its absence from many lives should be the subject of discussion by political leaders. Later, when Balram is weighing whether or not he should murder his employer, he notes that although he makes 4,000 rupees a month, he saves "nothing" (210). The servant and eventual chauffeur job do pay, but it is essentially "nothing" in that the money would never be enough to save for property or travel or a change in socioeconomic status. The status is viewed more permanently through India's caste system than status in the U.S. where ideals of the "American Dream" are a hope if not a reality. Balram is fascinated by the U.S. and appreciates its secularism, capitalism, and democracy, but notes that India, too, has these ideologies in place. The problem is that they have not reached all people as they should. Although the United States also has a large poverty problem and

people who are discriminated against for religious beliefs, the scale is much smaller.

The government has an easier time preventing religious attacks and giving aid to the poor owing to a more strongly established infrastructure of government. In *The White Tiger* US-America is a symbolic dream rather than a country to emulate and Balram equates this possibility to himself, ignoring traditions of India's caste system. However, it is harder for the government to define and give rights against discrimination to lower castes. With the caste system of India, there is empowerment in being able to lack definition as a particularly different race, but it also makes it more difficult to overtly help certain groups of people who are unaccounted for. Therefore, it becomes the individual's burden or opportunity to take advantage of this mutability. If an individual of a lower caste is to mutate his/her existence, he/she must choose an established existence to inhabit.

Balram finds a fitting niche in the space his employer holds. Although Balram's boss Mr. Ashok is "smart" enough to pick up on important changes within India's social and economic network, he unknowingly gives Balram the final push toward the very bottom of nothingness, therefore causing the servant to seek a switching of places with his employer. Ashok speaks of his yearning for the simple life of servants without realizing that his servant has planned to switch places. He talks of the wonderful food that they eat and how they have such a strong sense of family. The problem is that for Balram to become "(in a sense) his master" (39), he must kill him. Balram is surrounded by death as a child and then has a death like fainting spells as he closes in on nothingness. For him to make a full switch to master status, Ashok must take the full step to death. He cannot seek his difference, which we see as he never fully understands Balram, and so his non-identity is also a non-being. His "difference fails to be accounted for," and he succumbs to "absolute loss, with death" (Derrida 400). If Ashok had been able to understand more deeply the difference between his place in society and Balram's, he might have been able to change enough (higher wages, better living space, or more freedom of time) to keep Balram from killing him.

However, his failure to fully embrace the beauty

and intelligence in Balram, who is also a part of his nation and culture, is what ceases his existence. The final push follows a chain of events beginning with Ashok's wife accidentally killing a nameless poor person on the road. Ashok's less-humane partner suggests that Balram take the fall for the crime so that they will "have nothing to worry about" (142). The calmness that Ashok exhibits at this suggestion forces Balram into an even deeper frenzy of despair and anger. While the charges are quickly dropped Balram's anger lingers and intensifies when Ashok seeks support after his wife leaves him. Instead of making noise and visible emotion, Balram retreats into quiet nothingness. In the ensuing narrative sounds and doings of "nothing" are echoed. Balram comes to the door for "nothing, Sir" and Ashok says "nothing about" his previous unfair treatment toward Balram (157). Even Ashok feels that he is "absolutely nothing" because of the lack of family in his life (161). Balram questions "the point of living?" (159) And this allows him to realize he does have a point if he can only switch places. It is more evident that Ashok's being merely dissolves, because "master and driver had somehow become one body that night" (169), although this is during the night before the murder. When Balram finally does kill his master by the roadside, he proclaims immediately that he is "a free man" (246).

The plot speeds up quickly, and we find Balram as the boss of a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. Instead of being a chauffeur, he owns cars and has drivers who work for him. The police even answer him. Now using his employer's name and the added pseudonym of "The White Tiger," Balram transcends the social, economic, and political status he was born into suddenly towards the end of the novel, both "everything" and "nothing" are played against each other, like the paradox in *anenso*, in a series of altered reality, nightmare, and dream. In a sentence separated by paragraphing, the narrator states, "The difference is everything" about the way he can now "complain about the police" as a "rich" man (266). Because he now has money and power, someone someday may listen to him. Perhaps even the prime minister of China will pay attention to his message. Although Balram recognizes murder as wrong, he finds the "real nightmare" to be if he

never had the nerve to kill Ashok (269). There is no guilt for his crime because he sees murder as the only way to realize his Being. He also has a dream to “sell everything, take the money, and start a school an English language school for the poor children in Bangalore” (275).

Balram furthers his definition of Being by showing his altruistic side. However, as he thinks further about this dream, he proclaims that “all this dreaming I’m doing. It may well turn out to be nothing” (275). The state of India’s government and society may not allow him to do something so altruistic. This constant shift from everything to nothing and reality to dreams and nightmares shows that *The White Tiger* continues to be cognizant of *différance*. Sudden success has not stopped Balram from getting in touch with his Being. The fact that he writes to the Chinese premier show she wants more to happen for his country. His thoughts of starting a school also show a positive dynamic quality. However, he is entrenched in corruption with the police and his workforce. Balram’s last pronouncement is that he is “ready to have children,” but he negates it with a final “Ha!” (276).

He knows that changes are still needed in India for future generations. To Conclude, Balram’s story is relevant to India’s current state of affairs and its hierarchical society despite attempts to institute change. It is unclear what, exactly; Balram would like the Chinese premier to do. However, we gain awareness of a lost people with great potential to change Indian culture: the relevance of Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and its narration of Balram’s lack of education and his story paired with entrenched social

hierarchy hold large numbers back from becoming dynamic individuals.

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