

Moral Ambiguity and Social Justice: Ethics in the Face of Inequality in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

*This paper examines moral ambiguity and social justice in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, focusing on the ethical tensions created by India's deep socioeconomic inequalities. The novel traces the transformation of Balram Halwai from an impoverished village servant to a successful entrepreneur through acts that include deception and murder. By analyzing Balram's morally questionable decisions, the study interrogates whether transgressive actions can be ethically defensible when undertaken to escape systemic oppression. Drawing on theoretical perspectives from Michel Foucault, Frantz Fanon, and John Rawls, the paper situates the novel within broader debates on power, justice, and resistance. It argues that justice in the text is neither fixed nor universal but shaped by structures of domination and survival. Ultimately, the study highlights how Adiga complicates conventional moral frameworks by portraying ethical decision-making as inseparable from material conditions and institutional inequality.*

Keywords: Moral Ambiguity, Dubious, Ethics, Immoral, Oppression, Intertwined, Conflict.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* explores the bleak aspects of India's economic growth. Although globalization and modernization suggest a future of wealth, Adiga uncovers a society split between the elite "Light" and the marginalized "Darkness." In this strict social order, ethical principles become twisted, and moral conduct is frequently compromised for the sake of survival. The story's narrator and main character, Balram Halwai, rises from the impoverished environment of Laxmangarh to establish himself as a successful business owner in Bangalore, but his journey is tainted by treachery, theft, and murder. Through Balram's confessional account, Adiga compels readers to face challenging ethical dilemmas: Can immoral actions be excused if they result in liberation from oppression? Is justice achievable in a system founded on exploitation? These inquiries position *The White Tiger* within the conversation surrounding moral complexity and social justice.

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga has gained significant attention from scholars due to its strong criticism of social injustice

and the moral confusion that arises from an unfair economic system. The book depicts inequality as a deep-rooted issue that influences individual morals, rather than just showing a failure of character. Critics widely recognize it for revealing the stark divisions of class, caste, and wealth in contemporary Indian society. Research points out Adiga's use of the "Rooster Coop" as a symbol of systemic oppression, highlighting how the poor internalize obedience and fear, which keeps the cycle of exploitation going. In this setting, Balram Halwai's transformation from a submissive servant to a successful businessman has sparked extensive discussions on ethics and social justice.

The *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga has received a lot of criticism because of its uncompromising portrayal of social injustice and the moral ambiguity that results from it. Scholars frequently observe that Adiga portrays inequality in India as a lived reality affected by caste, class, and economic power all of which have a significant impact on moral reasoning and human behavior rather than as an abstract idea. Critics see the metaphor of the "Rooster Coop" as a powerful illustration of how fear, reliance, and societal conditioning trap the impoverished in cycles of submission, and it has been fundamental to many interpretations. In light of this, Balram.

Halwai's transition from a submissive servant to a self-sufficient businessman has sparked a lot of discussion, especially over morality and social justice. Instead of categorically denouncing Balram, many critics contend that his ethically dubious acts violence, deceit, and betrayal come from a system that routinely denies the oppressed any chance at growth or self-respect. In this way, the book purposefully challenges accepted moral beliefs by implying that moral clarity becomes challenging, if not impossible, in a highly corrupt and unfair societal structure. Balram's ascent is further seen by Marxist and cultural materialist interpretations as a critique of capitalist systems that promote brutal ambition while ignoring moral responsibility and human values.

Balram Halwai's evolution from a servant to a "self-made man" is characterized by moral ambiguity. Coming from a lower-caste background, Balram adopts a profound sense of servitude, referring to himself as a "half-baked" individual shaped by ignorance and discrimination. However, as he observes the hypocrisy of his employers the affluent Ashok and Pinky Madam he becomes conscious of the moral contradictions within the upper class. They advocate for virtue while flourishing through corruption and exploitation. Consequently, Balram's choice to kill Ashok transcends a mere criminal act; it represents a symbolic revolt against a system that strips him of his autonomy.

Adiga employs Balram's perspective to rationalize his choices through the concept of survival. Balram perceives morality as a privilege reserved for the wealthy. In a reality where the impoverished are overlooked and treated as expendable, ethical integrity loses its significance. He contends that "the servant who steals is no different from the master who robs the nation." This reversal of ethical standards highlights the relativity of morality within an unfair society. Balram's act of murder serves as both a declaration of autonomy and a moral failing a duality that encapsulates the novel's core ambiguity.

The novel places individual ethics within a larger context of societal injustice. Adiga depicts India as a nation where corruption permeates all sectors from government to commerce and where inequality is entrenched. The imagery of the "rooster coop" represents how servitude is upheld not only through coercion but also through mental conditioning. The impoverished, akin to captive roosters, observe their own plight yet continue to be compliant out of fear and adherence to cultural norms. Balram's choice to "escape the confines" represents a moral uprising against systemic wrongdoing. However, this uprising results in another's death, highlighting the contradiction of ethical defiance in a corrupt society. Adiga implies that in a morally bankrupt setting, even emancipatory actions are tinged with violence and remorse. Balram's evolution into a businessman reflects India's capitalist ambitions, yet his achievements are founded on unethical practices. The novel consequently raises the question of whether social advancement gained through immoral methods can genuinely be regarded as justice.

Adiga uses *The White Tiger* to explore the moral decay that accompanies rapid modernization. The novel reflects on the growing divide between the wealthy and the impoverished and the ethical compromises that must occur to bridge this divide. While Adiga shows Balram primarily as a victim, he also shows that Balram is guilty of the moral complexities that come about as a result of India's switch to a more capitalistic framework. Balram is neither completely innocent nor entirely evil he depicts the contradictions found in a society that elevates and champions success while ignoring the moral injustice that occurs in order for that success to exist.

Another layer of irony in the narrative's epistolary structure (Balram writing letters to the Premier of China). By writing to a foreign government leader, Balram positions himself as the voice of the "real India", emphasizing the commonality of development and the disparities of unequal wealth in his narrative tone. Balram's personal tone is both confessional and simultaneously proud, as Adiga may be commenting on the ethical relativism where confession becomes a process of self-gratification, rather than the process of repenting for one's wrongdoing.

Moral Ambiguity, Social Justice, and Ethics in a World of Inequality in *The White Tiger* illustrates that when inequality is deeply engrained in society, the distinction between moral right and wrong becomes blurred. Balram's moral development demonstrates that ethical norms cannot be divorced from the social and economic contexts that shape them. *The White Tiger* forces its readers to reevaluate the meaning of justice when traditional morality propels oppression rather than disrupts it. *The White Tiger* is, if anything, a revelation not a tale of redemption, but an acknowledgment that systemic inequality leads to moral decay and that moral ambiguity is a strategy for survival in a world of inequality. Adiga's text provides an incisive critique of the conscience of modern India, raising the question of whether social justice can be achieved without ethical sacrifice.

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The White Tiger ultimately shows that moral ambivalence is not only an individual flaw, but a manifestation of an inequitable system. Balram's evolution from a servant to a successful business owner illustrates that in a society rife with injustices, survival and corruption become intertwined. Adiga compels readers to consider whether it is possible to be moral in a space that rewards exploitation. Through Balram's morally ambiguous journey, Adiga effectively reveals the ethical price of social mobility and the fragility of justice in contemporary India.

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