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Subaltern awakening: Injustice, Poverty, and the Fractured self in Aravind Adiga's the White Tiger

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Abstract
Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) offers a sharp critique of postcolonial India through the epistolary narrative of Balram Halwai, a self-made entrepreneur from a rural, impoverished background. The novel explores the subaltern awakening of Balram, who transitions from servitude in the 'Darkness' of rural poverty to success in the urban 'Light' of globalisation. Trapped initially in the metaphorical 'Rooster Coop' of caste-based oppression and familial loyalty, Balram confronts systemic injustice, rampant corruption, and stark class divides that perpetuate poverty and exploitation. His fractured self emerges from internal conflicts between traditional morality and the ruthless ambition required for social mobility in a neoliberal society. Through murder and betrayal, Balram breaks free, embodying a violent rebellion against subaltern subjugation. His eventual emancipation through murder and betrayal underscores the moral fragmentation required to escape systemic entrapment. Adiga satirises India's economic rise while highlighting the moral costs of individual empowerment in an unequal system. This study illuminates how poverty dehumanises the marginalised, forcing a fragmented identity in pursuit of freedom.I would like to examine Forster's treatment of the colonial concerns between the East and West through the art of characterization and plot construction.

Keywords: Subaltern awakening, injustice, poverty, fractured self, class struggle

Introduction
Adiga's acclaimed novel *The White Tiger* powerfully illuminates the persistent structures of inequality in postcolonial India, focusing on the marginalised and oppressed segments of society. Through the protagonist Balram Halwai's narrative, Adiga locates the oppressed in the corollary of his meta-narrative. The novel presents the story of the others, the story of the suppressed and humiliated, the exploited marginal group who are denied equality, and thereby called underprivileged. These individuals are subordinated because of their social position, racial, religious, or economic status, forming an underclass trapped in a dichotomy between the dominant and subordinate classes. In contemporary India, this underclass includes peasantry, workers, labourers, small businessmen, drivers, lower classes, tribes, aborigines, and minorities, all suppressed in various ways amid the nation's capitalist development.

The concept of the 'subaltern' originates with Antonio Gramsci, who employed it to denote those of "inferior rank" outside established political structures (Abrams and Harpham 307). As noted, "Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups" (Gramsci 55). Gramsci extended the term beyond military hierarchies to refer to any low-ranking person or group suffering hegemonic domination, denied basic rights to participate in local history and culture. The Subaltern Studies Collective, led by Ranajit Guha, further defined it "as a name for the general attribute of subordination ... whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office, or in any other way" (vii). This approach emphasises recovering the consciousness and agency of marginalised peoples deprived of power, whose voices are often silenced yet manifest in attitudes, manners, speech, and occasional rebellion. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) underscores the challenge: though subalterns possess a voice borne along with their agony and suffering, structural barriers prevent authentic representation. Leela Gandhi notes that Subaltern Studies aimed "to allow the 'people' finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing to speak for, or sound the muted voice of truly

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oppressed" (Gandhi 2). Ranajit Guha similarly framed it as "listening to the small voice of history" (1). In *The White Tiger*, Adiga examines the suffering, repression, and humiliation of the poor in a globalised capitalist society through Balram's journey from perpetual servitude to violent self-liberation. Balram represents his class, exposing class divides rooted in caste, race, and economic disparity that perpetuate discrimination and marginality. This study explores Balram's subaltern awakening amid injustice and poverty, revealing how systemic oppression fractures the self, compelling moral compromise for agency and mobility.

Research Methodology
This study employs a qualitative research methodology rooted in close textual analysis and postcolonial theoretical frameworks to examine subaltern awakening, injustice, poverty, and the fractured self in Adiga's *The White Tiger*. The primary text is analysed through the lens of Subaltern Studies, drawing on key concepts from Antonio Gramsci, Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Leela Gandhi to explore the dynamics of hegemony, marginality, and resistance. The epistolary narrative of the protagonist Balram Halwai serves as the central focus, with particular attention to symbolic elements such as the 'Rooster Coop,' the Darkness/Light dichotomy, and metaphors of servitude and entrepreneurship. Thematic analysis is conducted to trace Balram's psychological journey from internalised oppression to violent rebellion, highlighting how systemic inequality fragments identity and compels moral compromise. Supporting insights are derived from secondary sources on postcolonial literature, class struggle, and neoliberal globalisation in India, ensuring an interpretive approach that foregrounds the 'small voice' of the marginalised while critiquing dominant socio-economic structures.

Discussion
The White Tiger offers a powerful exploration of subaltern existence in modern India, highlighting how systemic injustice and entrenched poverty contribute to a fractured sense of self among the marginalised, ultimately culminating in a defiant awakening. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, narrates his journey from rural oppression to urban entrepreneurship, revealing the stark divisions within Indian society. He describes India as split into two realms:

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotus and lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotus and lilies. Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. …India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India- the black river. (Adiga 14)

This dichotomy underscores the geographical and socioeconomic fractures that shape subaltern lives, where proximity to coastal prosperity contrasts sharply with inland deprivation. Balram's own fractured identity emerges from this divide; born in the Darkness, he internalises shame as "half-baked," mocked for his lack of knowledge, yet he possesses innate intelligence that sets him apart (10).

Injustice permeates Balram's world through exploitative structures that perpetuate class and caste hierarchies. In his village, Laxmangarh, landlords nicknamed after animals dominate the poor: the Stork owns the river, the Wild Boar controls fertile land, the Raven holds rocky hillsides, and the Buffalo commands roads and rickshaws, extracting tolls and labour without mercy. Balram summarises this shift in societal castes: "To sum up -in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies eat or get eaten up" (64). This binary reflects how class has overshadowed traditional caste, yet both oppress the subaltern. Balram, from a lower caste, experiences double marginalisation as a servant, performing menial tasks beyond driving, such as massaging his employer's legs or chasing animals. He idolises Hanuman as "the favourite god of the people of Darkness because he was a faithful servant and showed how to serve your master with fidelity, love and devotion" (33). This religious reinforcement normalises servitude, fracturing the self by demanding absolute loyalty while denying freedom. Institutional failures amplify injustice; government schools lack proper meals and uniforms, stolen by corrupt teachers, and hospitals exist only on foundation stones, leaving the poor untreated. Balram's father dies untreated, highlighting how the marginalised are expendable in a system favouring the elite.

Poverty further fractures the subaltern self by enforcing dehumanising conditions and migration cycles. Balram details the Ganga's pollution: "I urge you not to take dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids." Contrasting official reverence, he calls it a source of darkness and disease (15). Rural families depend on migrant earnings, with women snatching remittances, while urban servants endure cramped dormitories with constant summons via bells. In slums, workers building malls live in tarpaulin tents amid sewage, defecating openly and risking disease. Balram notes the irony: "These people were buildings homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage" (260). Physical marks of poverty etch the body: "A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different. My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into his buttocks. The story of the poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen" (27). This bodily inscription symbolises the fractured self, where hardship visibly divides the poor from the privileged. Balram's father resists begging landlords, aspiring for his son to "live like a man," yet poverty forces Balram into tea shops and servitude, enduring physical abuse like ear-burning (30).

The concept of the 'Rooster Coop' illustrates how poverty and injustice maintain subaltern compliance, trapping individuals in a collective fractured psyche. Servants witness exploitation yet remain loyal, fearing family reprisals, as in the story of a falsely accused servant killed with his kin. Balram explains this trap prevents rebellion, fracturing agency by binding personal freedom to familial safety. Migration reinforces this; villagers board

overcrowded transports to cities, seeking work as labourers or servants. Caste discrimination persists even in employment; Balram lies about his experience and faces scrutiny over his Halwai background. Religious hiding, as with driver Ram Persad, and framing in accidents, reveal vulnerability. When Pinky kills a child, Balram is coerced into confession, exposing how the poor absorb elite crimes. This accumulated injustice and poverty propel Balram's awakening, mending his fractured self through radical defiance. Initially "half-baked" and servile, he faints at the zoo's white tiger, apologising: "I can't live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny. I'm so sorry." Murdering his master liberates him: "All I wanted was the chance to be a man – and for that, one murder was enough" (315). In Bangalore, Ashok Sharma builds an empire, treating employees fairly: "I don't treat them like servants---I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling them my 'family', either. They're my employees … I make them sign a contract and I sign too, and both of us must honour that contract" (302). He assumes responsibility for accidents: "I am the owner of the vehicle. Your fight is with me, not with this driver. He was following my orders to drive as fast as he could. The blood is on my hands, not his… I offer myself as your ransom" (307). This inversion heals fractures, shifting from victim to ethical master. Balram declares: "I have woken up, and the rest of you are still sleeping, and that is the only difference between us" (315). His self-taught entrepreneurship embodies duality: "an entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time" (9).

Adiga's novel thus portrays subaltern awakening as a response to profound fractures caused by injustice and poverty. Balram's transformation critiques persistent inequalities, showing how oppression breeds both compliance and rebellion. Through his narrative, the subaltern voice emerges, challenging the rooster coop and reclaiming humanity in a divided society. *The White Tiger* reveals that without systemic change, fractured selves may awaken violently, echoing the ongoing struggles of the marginalised in twenty-first-century India.

The subaltern theme in Adiga's novel delves into the broader erasure of marginalised voices within societal and political frameworks, where the lower classes remain perpetually sidelined from meaningful participation. In rural settings, democratic illusions crumble as the poor are physically excluded from exercising basic rights, their presence in official records meaningless without actual access. This systemic silencing deepens the internal fragmentation of the subaltern, fostering a sense of powerlessness that divides the self between outward compliance and suppressed frustration. Balram's progression from passive endurance to vocal narration exemplifies how this imposed muteness can eventually fracture into assertive expression, allowing the subaltern to challenge dominant narratives through personal testimony. The novel thus positions the subaltern as inherently disruptive when granted a platform, transforming silence into a catalyst for exposing entrenched hierarchies and demanding recognition.

Additionally, the fractured self arises from the relentless need for psychological compartmentalisation, as the oppressed must juggle conflicting roles to endure daily humiliations. Urban environments intensify this split, with servants confined to peripheral spaces filled with vermin and constant availability, their humanity reduced to functional utility amid elite extravagance. Encounters with persistent bias, whether through occupational gatekeeping or scapegoating for elite errors, further erode cohesive identity, pushing individuals to conceal their true potential beneath layers of deference. The metaphorical coop sustains this division by linking individual actions to collective vulnerability, instilling a paralysing dread that prevents unified resistance. Adiga illustrates how such ongoing internal conflict not only sustains oppression but also accumulates tension, priming the subaltern psyche for eventual rupture and reconfiguration.

Balram's ultimate reclamation of his splintered identity highlights the transformative, yet costly, nature of subaltern empowerment, prompting reflection on the boundaries of moral compromise in pursuit of autonomy. By establishing his enterprise, he consciously rejects inherited patterns of dominance, prioritising equitable treatment and personal accountability in his operations. This shift partially integrates his divided self, enabling a proclamation of distinct consciousness that sets him apart from the unawakened masses. Nevertheless, the narrative cautions that such breakthroughs frequently demand transgressive actions in the absence of fair opportunities, underscoring the violence inherent in breaking free from pervasive constraints. Adiga employs this arc to advocate for structural reforms that could prevent identity fractures, envisioning a framework where the subaltern attains integrity through legitimate means rather than destructive rebellion.

Conclusion

Adiga's *The White Tiger* provides a compelling examination of the subaltern condition in contemporary India, revealing how deep-seated social inequalities continue to shape the lives of the marginalised. Through the story of Balram Halwai, the novel exposes the persistent barriers of class and caste that limit opportunities and reinforce dependency among the lower strata of society. These structures not only restrict economic mobility but also hinder access to basic resources such as quality education, healthcare, and fair employment, trapping individuals in cycles of deprivation. The narrative highlights the contrast between official claims of national progress and the harsh realities faced by those on the margins, where development often benefits only a privileged few. Central to the novel is the exploration of personal identity under oppression. The protagonist's experiences illustrate how constant exploitation and discrimination can erode self-worth, creating a sense of division within the individual. This internal conflict arises from the need to conform to societal expectations while harbouring desires for dignity and independence. Adiga demonstrates that such pressures can lead to profound psychological strain, pushing the oppressed toward extreme choices in their quest for agency. The journey from submission to self-assertion underscores the human cost of inequality and the resilience required to challenge it.

This novel serves as a critique of a society that perpetuates division rather than fostering inclusion. It suggests that genuine advancement requires addressing the root causes of marginalisation, including corruption, unequal resource distribution, and outdated power dynamics. By giving voice to the experiences of the overlooked, Adiga invites reflection on the ethical responsibilities of a nation undergoing rapid change. The work reminds readers that

true prosperity depends on creating conditions where every individual can pursue a life of respect and fulfilment, free from systemic constraints. In doing so, *The White Tiger* contributes meaningfully to discussions on social justice and equity in modern literature

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