

THE WHITE TIGER

A STUDY OF ARAVIND ADIGA'S NOVEL

Expanded Study Notes

Contents

❖ Context

Author and Publication

- ❖ Written by Aravind Adiga, an Indian journalist and novelist; published in 2008 as his debut novel.
- ❖ Won the Man Booker Prize in 2008.
- ❖ Adiga worked as a journalist covering business and finance in India, which informs the novel's detailed picture of corruption and entrepreneurship.

Form: The Epistolary Frame

- ❖ The novel is structured as a series of letters written by Balram Halwai over seven nights, addressed to Wen Jiabao, the Premier of China.
- ❖ The frame device: Balram hears the Chinese Premier is visiting India to learn about entrepreneurship, and decides to tell his own story as the “truth” behind Indian success.
- ❖ This structure means the reader always knows from the first letter that Balram has murdered his master — the novel is about how and why, not what.
- ❖ Balram positions himself as an unreliable narrator and self-appointed guide, directly shaping how his story should be judged.

Historical and Social Context

- ❖ Set against India's early-2000s economic liberalisation and the rise of outsourcing, IT and globalised business.
- ❖ Explores the widening gap between rural poverty and urban wealth produced by rapid economic growth.
- ❖ Engages with the persistence of caste identity even as India presents itself internationally as a modern, meritocratic economy.
- ❖ Functions as satire of “Incredible India” marketing narratives and of Western fascination with Indian economic success stories.

❖ Plot Summary (By Night)

Night 1 — The Confession Begins

- ❖ Balram introduces himself to Premier Wen Jiabao and reveals immediately that he murdered his employer, Mr Ashok.
- ❖ He explains his intention to describe “the truth about Bangalore” by telling his own life story.
- ❖ Establishes the novel's frame, tone, and Balram's self-image as an entrepreneur.

Night 2 — Darkness

- ❖ Balram recounts his childhood in Laxmangarh, his family's poverty, and his father's work as a rickshaw-puller.
- ❖ His father dies of tuberculosis due to lack of medical care, exposing the neglect of the rural poor.
- ❖ Balram is pulled out of school by Kusum Granny to work, ending his formal education despite his intelligence.
- ❖ Introduces the concept of the Rooster Coop as the system that keeps the poor obedient.

Night 3 — Becoming a Driver

- ❖ Balram learns to drive and is employed by the Stork's family as a second driver, working under the senior driver Ram Persad.
- ❖ He discovers Ram Persad is secretly Muslim and blackmails him into leaving, securing the position of main driver for the family.
- ❖ Moves with the family first to Dhanbad and prepares to relocate to Delhi with Ashok and Pinky Madam.

Night 4 — Delhi and Corruption

- ❖ Balram is exposed to the wealth, luxury and casual cruelty of Delhi's elite while continuing to be treated as a servant.
- ❖ Witnesses Ashok delivering bribes to politicians, revealing how business success depends on corruption.
- ❖ Balram begins to feel humiliation and resentment alongside his loyalty to Ashok.

Night 5 — The Accident

- ❖ Pinky Madam causes a hit-and-run accident while driving drunk.
- ❖ Balram is pressured into signing a false confession taking the blame, exposing how the poor are used to shield the wealthy from consequences.
- ❖ Pinky Madam grows increasingly unhappy in India and eventually leaves Ashok and returns to America.

Night 6 — Disillusionment

- ❖ Ashok's behaviour worsens after Pinky Madam's departure; he drinks heavily and grows careless and depressed.
- ❖ Balram continues to witness and participate in the corruption surrounding Ashok's business dealings, including further bribes to the Great Socialist.

- ❖ Balram's resentment and ambition intensify; he begins planning to break free of servitude entirely.

Night 7 — The Murder and Reinvention

- ❖ Balram murders Ashok with a broken bottle and steals the red bag containing bribe money intended for a politician.
- ❖ He flees to Bangalore, adopts the identity “Ashok Sharma,” and starts his own taxi company, White Tiger Drivers.
- ❖ He acknowledges that his family in the village will likely be killed in retaliation, but accepts this as the price of his freedom.
- ❖ The novel ends with Balram fully transformed from servant to master, having replicated the very system of corruption and exploitation he once suffered under.

❖ Major Themes

1. The Self-Made Man vs the Rooster Coop

The Ideal

- ❖ Balram presents himself as a self-made entrepreneur.
- ❖ He rises from a poor village boy to a successful businessman.
- ❖ He believes modern India celebrates those who create their own success.

The Rooster Coop

- ❖ Balram's metaphor for the system that traps the poor.
- ❖ Chickens watch others being slaughtered but never attempt to escape.
- ❖ The poor are conditioned to accept servitude.
- ❖ Families and communities help maintain the system.
- ❖ The coop is “guarded from the inside.”

Balram's Argument

- ❖ To escape, a person must become a “White Tiger.”
- ❖ A White Tiger is a rare individual willing to sacrifice everything for freedom.
- ❖ Balram views the murder of Mr Ashok as a necessary step towards success and independence.

Key Quotation

“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.” Balram Halwai

2. Social Inequality, Corruption and Morality

Systemic Corruption

- ❖ Corruption exists at every level of society.
- ❖ Politicians rig elections.
- ❖ Teachers steal educational funds.
- ❖ Police accept bribes.
- ❖ Wealthy people avoid taxes.
- ❖ Honesty is often a disadvantage.

The India of Darkness vs the India of Light

- ❖ **Darkness**
 - Rural poverty.
 - Lack of opportunity.
 - Ignorance.
 - Servitude.
- ❖ **Light**
 - Urban wealth.
 - Technology.

- Economic success.
- Modernisation.

Moral Ambiguity

- ❖ Neither side is morally pure.
- ❖ Wealth and success are often built on corruption.
- ❖ Balram believes corruption is necessary for survival.

Key Quotation

“The Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time.”
Balram Halwai

3. Freedom, Identity and Reinvention

Freedom as Escape

- ❖ Balram's greatest goal is freedom.
- ❖ Freedom means no longer being a servant.
- ❖ He wants control over his own life.

Reinvention of Identity

- ❖ **Munna (“Boy”)**
 - His childhood identity.
 - Represents powerlessness.
- ❖ **Balram Halwai**
 - Name given by his teacher.
 - Connects him to his caste.
- ❖ **The White Tiger**
 - Symbol of uniqueness.
 - Represents exceptional potential.
- ❖ **Ashok Sharma**
 - New identity after murdering Ashok.
 - Represents his transformation into a master rather than a servant.

Key Quotation

“Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave.” Balram Halwai

4. Family as a Trap

Deconstruction of Family

- ❖ Family obligations prevent social mobility.
- ❖ Individuals sacrifice their dreams for family survival.
- ❖ Family becomes a mechanism of control.

Kusum Granny as Enforcer

- ❖ Prioritises survival over education.

- ❖ Forces children to work.
- ❖ Arranges marriages.
- ❖ Demands wages from family members.

Balram's Break

- ❖ His ultimate rebellion is separating himself from his family.
- ❖ He knows his family may suffer because of his actions.
- ❖ He accepts this cost in exchange for freedom.

Key Quotation

“The Indian family is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop.” Balram Halwai

❖ Language and Form

- ❖ The epistolary structure — letters to Premier Wen Jiabao — creates a false intimacy and lets Balram control exactly how his story is told and judged.
- ❖ Because Balram reveals the murder in the opening pages, the novel builds dramatic irony and suspense around how and why rather than what happens.
- ❖ Balram is a retrospective, self-justifying narrator; his confident, persuasive tone should be read critically rather than taken at face value.
- ❖ Adiga uses dark comedy and satire to address serious subject matter — poverty, exploitation, murder — which can make readers complicit in laughing at systemic injustice before recognising its horror.
- ❖ Extended metaphors (the Rooster Coop, the White Tiger, Darkness and Light) structure Balram's entire worldview and argument, functioning as organising devices for the novel's social critique.
- ❖ Balram's direct, colloquial address to “Mr Premier” subverts the conventions of formal postcolonial narrative, positioning an uneducated servant as the authoritative voice on modern India.

❖ Character Profiles and Development

Balram Halwai

Role

- ❖ Narrator.
- ❖ Anti-hero.
- ❖ Unreliable narrator.

Initial State (Darkness)

- ❖ Poor village boy.
- ❖ Member of the Halwai caste.
- ❖ Intelligent and observant.
- ❖ Dreams of escaping poverty.

Catalyst for Change

- ❖ Identified as a “White Tiger” by a school inspector.
- ❖ Begins believing he is different from others.
- ❖ Becomes a driver and gains access to the world of the rich.

Character Development

- ❖ **Stage 1: Survivor**
 - Learns to navigate corruption.
 - Blackmails Ram Persad.
 - Becomes the main driver.
- ❖ **Stage 2: Disillusioned Servant**
 - Witnesses corruption among the wealthy.
 - Experiences humiliation and exploitation.
 - Begins stealing from Ashok.
- ❖ **Stage 3: The Murderer**
 - Plans Ashok's murder.
 - Steals the bribe money.
 - Justifies the murder as necessary for freedom.
- ❖ **Stage 4: The New Master**
 - Moves to Bangalore.
 - Creates White Tiger Drivers.
 - Uses bribery and corruption himself.

Final State

- ❖ Wealthy.
- ❖ Powerful.
- ❖ Independent.
- ❖ Morally compromised.

- ❖ Isolated from others.

Mr Ashok

Role

- ❖ Balram's employer.
- ❖ Represents the seemingly good member of the elite class.

Traits

- ❖ Educated.
- ❖ Gentle.
- ❖ More compassionate than his family.
- ❖ Uncomfortable with corruption.

Development

- ❖ Criticises corruption but participates in it.
- ❖ Benefits from exploitation.
- ❖ Becomes depressed after Pinky leaves.
- ❖ Descends into alcohol abuse.

Irony

- ❖ Appears kind but never truly changes Balram's circumstances.
- ❖ Remains part of the corrupt system.

Pinky Madam

Role

- ❖ Ashok's American wife.
- ❖ Represents the clash between Western and Indian values.

Traits

- ❖ Independent.
- ❖ Frustrated with life in India.
- ❖ Critical and demanding.

Significance

- ❖ Responsible for the hit-and-run accident.
- ❖ Allows Balram to take the blame.
- ❖ Leaves India and abandons Ashok.
- ❖ Her departure contributes to Ashok's decline.

Kusum Granny

Role

- ❖ Family matriarch.
- ❖ Symbol of the Rooster Coop.

Traits

- ❖ Manipulative.
- ❖ Practical.
- ❖ Focused on survival.

Significance

- ❖ Pulls Balram out of school.
- ❖ Forces him to work.
- ❖ Controls family members through obligation and guilt.
- ❖ Represents internalised oppression.

The Stork

Role

- ❖ Ashok's father.
- ❖ Wealthy landlord and businessman.

Traits

- ❖ Ruthless.
- ❖ Powerful.
- ❖ Exploitative.

Significance

- ❖ Represents the old feudal system.
- ❖ Profits from the labour of the poor.
- ❖ Treats servants as tools.

The Mongoose (Mukesh Sir)

Role

- ❖ Ashok's brother.

Traits

- ❖ Suspicious.
- ❖ Manipulative.
- ❖ Openly corrupt.

Significance

- ❖ Represents the modern corrupt elite.
- ❖ Less sympathetic than Ashok.
- ❖ Treats Balram harshly.

Minor Characters (New)

Balram's Father (Vikram Halwai)

- ❖ A rickshaw-puller worn down by a lifetime of poverty and physical labour.

- ❖ Dies of tuberculosis after being denied proper medical treatment, exposing the state's neglect of the rural poor.
- ❖ His one wish is that at least one of his sons live life “like a man” — a wish that motivates Balram.

Vitiligo-Lips

- ❖ The senior driver who first trains Balram in driving and in the unofficial rules of servant life.
- ❖ Balram ultimately displaces him by exposing and blackmailing Ram Persad, showing how the servant hierarchy turns the oppressed against one another.

Ram Persad

- ❖ The Stork's family's head driver before Balram.
- ❖ Secretly Muslim and hiding this fact to keep his job in a Hindu household.
- ❖ Blackmailed and forced out by Balram, who uses the threat of exposure to take his position — an early sign of Balram's ruthlessness.

Vijay

- ❖ A bus conductor from Balram's village who rises to become a local politician.
- ❖ Represents an early example, for Balram, of escaping a low caste background through opportunism rather than honesty.
- ❖ His success shapes Balram's belief that ambition and rule-breaking are necessary for social mobility.

Dharam

- ❖ Balram's young nephew, sent to live and work with him in Delhi.
- ❖ Represents the ongoing pull of family obligation even after Balram has begun to break away.

The Great Socialist

- ❖ A corrupt politician who demands bribes from Ashok's family in exchange for political protection.
- ❖ His populist name is deeply ironic, given his personal corruption and exploitation of the poor he claims to represent.
- ❖ Represents the failure of Indian democracy to protect ordinary people from systemic corruption.

❖ Symbols

The White Tiger

Meanings

- ❖ Rarity.
- ❖ Intelligence.
- ❖ Individuality.
- ❖ Freedom.
- ❖ Predatory power.

Importance

- ❖ Balram is identified as a White Tiger.
- ❖ Symbolises his exceptional nature.
- ❖ Represents his willingness to break rules to succeed.

Key Scenes

- ❖ School inspector's visit.
- ❖ Delhi Zoo scene.

The Rooster Coop

Meanings

- ❖ Systemic oppression.
- ❖ Entrapment.
- ❖ Servitude.
- ❖ Family control.

Importance

- ❖ Central metaphor of the novel.
- ❖ Explains why the poor rarely rebel.
- ❖ Represents psychological imprisonment.

Key Scenes

- ❖ Introduced in Chapter 5.
- ❖ Referenced throughout the novel.

The Black Fort

Meanings

- ❖ Freedom.
- ❖ Aspiration.
- ❖ Escape.
- ❖ Rebellion.

Importance

- ❖ Represents the world beyond the village.
- ❖ Symbolises Balram's desire for a different life.
- ❖ Spitting from the fort symbolises rejection of his destiny.

Key Scenes

- ❖ Chapter 1.
- ❖ Chapter 2.

The Red Bag

Meanings

- ❖ Temptation.
- ❖ Corruption.
- ❖ Wealth.
- ❖ Freedom.

Importance

- ❖ Contains the bribe money.
- ❖ Motivates Balram's murder of Ashok.
- ❖ Becomes the foundation of his business success.

Key Scenes

- ❖ Chapter 6.
- ❖ Chapter 7.

The India of Darkness and Light

Darkness

- ❖ Poverty.
- ❖ Rural life.
- ❖ Ignorance.
- ❖ Servitude.

Light

- ❖ Wealth.
- ❖ Urban development.
- ❖ Economic opportunity.

Importance

- ❖ Represents the divide within India.
- ❖ Shows inequality between rich and poor.
- ❖ Highlights that success is often linked to corruption.

❖ Key Character Pairs

Balram and Mr Ashok

- ❖ Servant vs Master.
- ❖ Oppression vs Freedom.
- ❖ Dependence vs Independence.

Balram and Kusum Granny

- ❖ Individual ambition vs Family obligation.
- ❖ Freedom vs Control.

Mr Ashok and the Mongoose

- ❖ Conscience vs Corruption.
- ❖ Weakness vs Ruthlessness.

Balram and the White Tiger Symbol

- ❖ Ordinary servant vs Exceptional individual.
- ❖ Entrapment vs Escape.
- ❖ Morality vs Success.

❖ Essay Writing Guidance

General Structure (PEEL)

- ❖ Point — state the argument of the paragraph clearly, linked to the essay question.
- ❖ Evidence — a short, accurately quoted piece of textual evidence.
- ❖ Explain — analyse how language, form or structure creates meaning (not just what happens).
- ❖ Link — connect back to the question and, ideally, forward to the next point.

Sample Thesis Statements

On the Rooster Coop

- ❖ Adiga's central metaphor of the Rooster Coop suggests that poverty in India is sustained less by physical force than by a psychological system of self-policing, in which family and community become instruments of the very oppression they suffer under.

On Corruption and Morality

- ❖ The White Tiger refuses to offer a morally pure alternative to corruption, instead suggesting that survival and success within modern India's economic system demand complicity in the very injustice Balram claims to escape.

On Freedom and Identity

- ❖ Balram's repeated reinvention of his own identity — from Munna to Balram Halwai to Ashok Sharma — dramatises freedom not as liberation from a corrupt system but as the acquisition of power within it.

Common Question Angles

- ❖ Is Balram a victim of his circumstances, a perpetrator of injustice, or both?
- ❖ How does Adiga use satire and dark comedy to critique modern India?
- ❖ Does the novel's ending represent triumph, tragedy, or moral failure?
- ❖ How does the epistolary structure shape the reader's judgement of Balram?
- ❖ To what extent does the novel suggest that the India of Light is simply a wealthier version of the India of Darkness?