



Global India, Local Darkness: Neoliberalism in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger offers a searing critique of neoliberal India, where economic liberalization and globalization are celebrated as symbols of progress while simultaneously deepening social inequality and moral corruption. Through the journey of Balram Halwai—from a village teashop worker to a self-proclaimed entrepreneur—the novel exposes the contradictions of a nation striving to project a global image of prosperity while concealing the entrenched realities of poverty, caste oppression, and exploitation. The narrative illustrates how neoliberal policies legitimize systemic corruption, widen the gap between the "Light" and the "Darkness," and transform violence into a tool of survival within a capitalist order. By foregrounding the stark disparities between rural stagnation and urban excess, Adiga underscores the human costs of India's economic rise. This paper examines the intersections of neoliberal ideology, class mobility, and moral ambiguity in The White Tiger, arguing that the novel destabilizes the myth of globalization as an equalizing force and instead reveals its complicity in sustaining hierarchical and exploitative structures.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, Globalization, Class and Caste Inequality, Capitalism, Corruption, Postcolonial India, Social Mobility, Aravind Adiga, The White Tiger

1. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), winner of the Man Booker Prize, is a bold and unsettling exploration of contemporary India in the wake of globalization and economic liberalization. Set against the backdrop of post-1991 neoliberal reforms, the novel dramatizes the widening gulf between the dazzling promise of "Shining India" and the grim realities of those left in the shadows. Adiga captures this paradox through the confessional narrative of Balram Halwai, a chauffeur-turned-entrepreneur whose rise from the "Darkness" of poverty to the "Light" of wealth is achieved through corruption, betrayal, and murder.

The title of this research, "**Global India, Local Darkness: Neoliberalism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***,"** reflects the central tension in the novel—the contradiction between India's global ambitions and the persistent local structures of caste, class, and inequality. Globalization, often celebrated as a force of modernization and democratization, is presented in the novel as complicit in reinforcing existing hierarchies and legitimizing exploitation. Adiga situates neoliberalism not as an equalizing framework but as a system that sharpens divisions, where success is purchased at the expense of ethics and the marginalized remain entrapped within the so-called "Rooster Coop" of servitude.

By employing an epistolary form in which Balram addresses the Chinese Premier, the narrative foregrounds India's global image while simultaneously exposing its internal fractures. The novel becomes both a critique of neoliberal ideology and a postcolonial commentary on the violence inherent in modernization. In this sense,

The White Tiger is not merely a story of individual aspiration but a larger allegory of India's contested identity in the global arena.

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the intersections of neoliberalism, globalization, and social inequality in *The White Tiger*, with particular attention to how Adiga destabilizes the celebratory discourse of economic progress. It argues that the novel underscores the costs of India's global ascent, revealing the persistence of "local darkness" beneath the veneer of modernity and progress.

1.1 Research Objectives

1. **To analyze** how *The White Tiger* critiques the impact of neoliberal globalization on Indian society, particularly in terms of widening socio-economic inequalities.
To examine the representation of corruption, exploitation, and moral compromise as consequences of neoliberal capitalist structures.
2. **To explore** the contrast between India's projected global image of prosperity ("Light") and the lived realities of poverty and marginalization ("Darkness").
3. **To investigate** Balram Halwai's transformation from servant to entrepreneur as a metaphor for social mobility shaped by neoliberal forces.
4. **To evaluate** the novel's role as a postcolonial narrative that challenges the myth of globalization as an equalizing force.

1.2 Study Design

Research Approach

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive literary analysis** to examine how Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* critiques neoliberal globalization in India. The approach is rooted in postcolonial literary theory, cultural studies, and critical perspectives on neoliberal economics.

Sources and Data

- **Primary Source:** Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008).
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly articles, books, and critical essays on neoliberalism, globalization, Indian economic reforms (post-1991), and literary critiques of Adiga's novel.

Theoretical Frameworks: Postcolonial criticism (Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha), neoliberal critiques (David Harvey, Naomi Klein), and subaltern studies (Ranajit Guha, Sharmila Rege).

Methodology

1. Textual Analysis:

- Close reading of narrative voice, symbolism (Light/Darkness, Rooster Coop, entrepreneurship), and character development of Balram Halwai.
- Identification of themes such as class struggle, corruption, globalization, and violence as survival.

2. Contextual Analysis:

- Situating the novel against the backdrop of India's post-liberalization economy (1991 onwards).

Exploring how neoliberal discourse creates winners and losers in the Indian social fabric.

3. Critical Interpretation:.

- Applying postcolonial and neoliberal critique frameworks to interpret the socio-economic commentary of the novel.
- Evaluating how Adiga destabilizes the "India Shining" narrative by foregrounding systemic inequality.

Scope and Delimitations

- The study focuses exclusively on *The White Tiger* as a representative text of neoliberal critique in Indian English fiction.
- It does not aim to generalize across all Indian literature but rather uses Adiga's novel as a lens to understand broader socio-economic realities.
- The paper prioritizes literary and ideological analysis over purely economic or statistical study.

Expected Contribution

The study aims to contribute to discussions on how literature exposes the contradictions of globalization and neoliberalism in contemporary India. It underscores Adiga's role in challenging dominant narratives of national progress and offering a counter-voice from the "Darkness."

2. Literature Review

2.1 Neoliberalism and Globalization in Postcolonial India

Scholarly discourse on neoliberalism highlights how India's 1991 economic liberalization policies reshaped its social and economic fabric. David Harvey (2005) defines neoliberalism as a political-economic project that privileges market deregulation, privatization, and the retreat of the welfare state, often exacerbating inequality. In the Indian context, theorists such as Aihwa Ong (2006) and Rupa Viswanath (2014) have emphasized that globalization not only opened India to international capital but also re-inscribed existing hierarchies of caste, class, and regional disparity. These frameworks form the backdrop against which Adiga situates his critique in *The White Tiger*, revealing how neoliberal reforms amplify systemic corruption and marginalization while producing new entrepreneurial subjectivities.

2.2 Class, Caste, and Social Stratification in Indian Fiction

The relationship between caste and class has been a recurring theme in Indian English literature. Scholars such as Meenakshi Mukherjee (2000) and G.N. Devy (2010) argue that Indian novels in English often reflect

the intersection of tradition and modernity, exploring how marginalized groups negotiate power. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga links caste-bound servitude with capitalist exploitation, showing how the “Rooster Coop” metaphor embodies centuries of structural oppression. Critical studies (e.g., Chandra, 2011; Banerjee, 2014) note that Balram’s eventual rise as an entrepreneur does not dismantle hierarchy but reconfigures it through violence, corruption, and complicity with neoliberal values.

2.3 Corruption, Capitalism, and Morality in Adiga’s Narrative

Adiga’s novel has generated substantial critical debate on its portrayal of corruption as an inevitable byproduct of neoliberal India. Scholars like Esha Roy (2012) and Anjaria (2009) suggest that the novel captures the moral ambiguities of rapid economic growth, where wealth is pursued at the expense of ethical accountability. Balram’s ascent through murder and deceit exemplifies what Jean and John Comaroff (2000) call the “millennial capitalism” that blurs the line between entrepreneurship and criminality. The text thus becomes a cultural critique of India’s global image as an “emerging market,” exposing the darkness underlying its celebrated modernity.

2.4 Narrative Form and the Subaltern Voice

The epistolary structure of *The White Tiger* has also been analyzed as a mode of subaltern self-representation. Critics such as Spivak (1988) have questioned whether the subaltern can truly speak, and Adiga’s use of Balram’s confessional letters to the Chinese Premier complicates this discourse. Scholars (e.g., S. Sharma, 2016; Pandey, 2019) argue that the narrative destabilizes dominant power structures by allowing a marginal figure to articulate his perspective, even if his empowerment arises through morally dubious choices. The confessional form highlights the contradictions of neoliberal India, where self-fashioning is tied to violence, mimicry, and opportunism.

2.5 Positioning *The White Tiger* in Global Literary Criticism

Since its publication, Adiga’s Booker Prize-winning novel has been both celebrated and critiqued. Some scholars praise its raw honesty in representing postcolonial India to a global audience (Tickell, 2010), while others accuse it of pandering to Western stereotypes of India as corrupt and chaotic (Mishra, 2008). This polarization underscores the novel’s role in global literary discourse—simultaneously serving as a narrative of resistance and as a text shaped by the market demands of global publishing. Within the context of neoliberalism, the novel itself can be read as a cultural product negotiating between global visibility and local authenticity.

3. Method

This research adopts a **qualitative and analytical approach** rooted in literary and cultural studies. The primary method involves a **close textual analysis** of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, focusing on narrative strategies, character development, and symbolic representations that illuminate the novel’s engagement with neoliberalism and globalization. The analysis emphasizes the contradictions between India’s globalized economic image and the persistent realities of poverty, corruption, and social inequality.

To frame the inquiry, the study draws upon **postcolonial theory, neoliberal critique, and globalization studies**, incorporating perspectives from scholars such as David Harvey on neoliberalism, Arjun Appadurai on globalization, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on subaltern representation. These theoretical frameworks enable a critical reading of how the novel exposes the socio-economic structures sustaining inequality in post-liberalization India.

The method also involves **contextual research**, situating the text within the socio-political landscape of 21st-century India, particularly the effects of economic reforms and the rhetoric of entrepreneurship. Comparative insights are employed where relevant, examining how similar themes of global capitalism and local marginalization appear in other postcolonial texts.

Ultimately, this method combines **literary analysis, theoretical interpretation, and socio-historical contextualization** to argue that *The White Tiger* destabilizes dominant narratives of neoliberal progress and foregrounds the lived experiences of those marginalized by globalization.

4. Findings

The analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* reveals multiple dimensions of how neoliberalism shapes and distorts the socio-economic realities of India.

4.1 Neoliberalism as a Mask for Inequality

The novel demonstrates that globalization and economic reforms, while creating pockets of wealth and modernity, fail to dismantle the entrenched hierarchies of caste and class. Instead, neoliberal ideology masks inequality by presenting entrepreneurship and free markets as universal opportunities, even though access remains limited to the privileged few.

4.2 The Persistence of the "Darkness"

Adiga's metaphor of the "Darkness" underscores how vast sections of India remain excluded from neoliberal prosperity. Balram's village life, characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and systemic oppression, illustrates the structural barriers that globalization does not eradicate but rather deepens. The novel highlights that neoliberal growth often thrives on the exploitation of the marginalized.

4.3 Corruption as a Neoliberal Byproduct

The novel depicts corruption not as a deviation from the system but as its very foundation in neoliberal India. Balram's rise as an entrepreneur is facilitated through bribery, murder, and moral compromise—signaling how neoliberal capitalism in India normalizes unethical practices as pathways to success. This reinforces Adiga's critique that the system rewards opportunism over morality.

4.4 Violence as a Route to Mobility

Balram's journey reveals that upward mobility under neoliberalism demands transgressive acts. His violent escape from servitude demonstrates that neoliberal "freedom" is inaccessible without breaching ethical boundaries. In this way, Adiga suggests that neoliberalism legitimizes violence by linking it with the pursuit of entrepreneurship and survival in a competitive capitalist economy.

4.5 The Myth of Global India

Finally, the findings show that Adiga destabilizes the celebratory narrative of India as a rising global power. While the novel portrays gleaming cities, malls, and multinational culture, it juxtaposes this image with systemic exploitation, social stagnation, and the silencing of the poor. Thus, *The White Tiger* critiques the myth of "Global India" by exposing its foundations in local darkness.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis of *The White Tiger* demonstrates that Aravind Adiga's novel is not merely a story of individual ambition but a profound commentary on the paradoxes of neoliberal India. Balram Halwai's ascent from servitude to entrepreneurship is framed as a triumph of agency, yet the very conditions that make his success possible—corruption, exploitation, and violence—expose the darker underside of globalization. His journey underscores the fact that neoliberalism, while promising opportunity and mobility, operates through structures that perpetuate inequality, normalize moral compromise, and legitimize systemic violence.

The discussion reveals how Adiga dismantles the celebratory discourse of India as a rising global power. The glittering image of call centers, outsourcing hubs, and urban affluence is contrasted with the lived realities of deprivation in villages and slums. Balram's narrative letters to the Chinese Premier highlight this duality, dramatizing the irony of India exporting its success story while silencing the persistent "rooster coop" of caste and class oppression at home. By placing the entrepreneur's voice at the center of the text, Adiga not only critiques the myth of neoliberal meritocracy but also destabilizes the very moral foundations upon which global capitalism rests.

Furthermore, the novel suggests that neoliberalism transforms individuals into both beneficiaries and perpetrators of systemic violence. Balram's act of murder, while enabling his liberation, becomes emblematic of the costs exacted by a system where survival demands betrayal and morality is subordinated to profit. In

this sense, Adiga positions neoliberal India as a space where the boundaries between the oppressor and the oppressed collapse, and where violence is both a symptom and a condition of economic progress.

In conclusion, *The White Tiger* dramatizes the tensions between India's global aspirations and its internal inequalities, offering a critical lens through which to understand the sociopolitical implications of neoliberal reforms. Adiga's work reveals that globalization, far from being a universal equalizer, entrenches old hierarchies in new forms, creating a society in which mobility is attainable but only at the expense of ethical integrity. Thus, the novel serves as a stark reminder that behind the narrative of "Global India" lies a "Local Darkness" that continues to shape the lives of millions—an unresolved contradiction that challenges the legitimacy of neoliberal progress itself.

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