

Corruption as Survival: A Study of Moral Economy and Upward Mobility in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* challenges conventional morality by depicting corruption not merely as a moral failing but as a survival strategy in post-liberalization India. This paper examines the protagonist of the novel Balram Halwai's transformation from a subservient driver to a self-made entrepreneur through the theoretical lens of James C. Scott's concept of the "moral economy". Through close textual analysis, this study demonstrates how the novel interrogates the relationship between economic survival, social mobility, and ethical compromise in a stratified society where traditional moral frameworks have been systematically violated by colonial and capitalist forces.

Keywords: moral economy, rooster coop, corruption, upward morality and survival strategy.

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008), which won the Man Booker Prize, has generated considerable scholarly attention for its unflinching portrayal of India's class divisions and the moral compromises required for upward mobility in a globalized economy. The novel's protagonist, Balram Halwai, transforms from an impoverished village boy into a successful Bangalore entrepreneur through a series of increasingly transgressive acts culminating in the murder of his employer. While some critics have read Balram's trajectory as a straightforward narrative of moral decay, this paper argues for a more nuanced interpretation grounded in theories of moral economy and subsistence ethics.

James C. Scott's landmark study *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (1976) articulates a framework for understanding how marginalized communities develop survival strategies based not on profit maximization but on risk minimization and subsistence security. Scott argues that peasants living near the subsistence margin prioritize "the highest and most stable payment for labor" over potentially higher but riskier returns, and that their sense of justice derives from evaluating whether social arrangements guarantee their survival (Scott 18). When elites violate this moral compact by extracting

resources beyond what allows for subsistence, peasants experience this as a fundamental betrayal that can spark rebellion.

Adiga's novel transplants this framework from the rural villages of Southeast Asia to the urban spaces of contemporary India, where the "rooster coop" of servitude replaces the rice paddy, and where corruption becomes the modern equivalent of traditional subsistence strategies. This paper examines how *The White Tiger* depicts corruption as a rational survival response to systemic inequality; how Balram's moral reasoning reflects a subaltern critique of elite hypocrisy, and ultimately how the novel questions whether genuine upward mobility is possible in postcolonial India without compromising one's ethical integrity.

Adiga introduces the metaphor of the "rooster coop" to describe the psychological and material conditions that trap India's servant class in perpetual subjugation. Balram explains this concept as a system where servants witness corruption and abuse yet remain complicit: "The greatest thing to come out of this country in its ten thousand years of history [...] is the rooster coop" (Adiga 147). Like chickens in a coop who watch others being slaughtered yet never rebel, India's poor remain trapped despite witnessing the exploitation of their peers.

This metaphor resonates powerfully with Scott's analysis of peasant subsistence crises. Scott argues that traditional village economies provided a form of social insurance through patron-client relationships and communal obligations, ensuring that even the poorest members would not fall below subsistence level during bad harvests or personal misfortune. However, colonialism and market integration disrupted these arrangements, leaving peasants vulnerable without alternative forms of security. As Scott notes, the colonial economy created "an almost total absence of any provision for the maintenance of a minimal income" while simultaneously "stripping away most of the traditional forms of social insurance" (Scott 10).

Balram's village of Laxmangarh exemplifies this dynamic. The traditional feudal system, dominated by landlords like "the Stork" and his family, extracts labor and resources from villagers while providing no genuine security or opportunity for advancement. The school system fails to educate, healthcare is nonexistent, and political representation serves only elite interests. When Balram's father dies of tuberculosis because they cannot afford medical treatment, it dramatizes the absence of the subsistence guarantee that Scott identifies as central to peasant moral economy. Balram recalls: "That's what I've seen—all my life—death by starvation, death by disease, death by the bullet" (Adiga 30). In this environment, the village no longer functions as a protective community but as a trap that ensures generational poverty.

The novel further demonstrates how India's economic liberalization has intensified rather than ameliorated these subsistence crises. While urban India experiences rapid growth, creating new wealth

for elites, the opportunities for servants like Balram remain constrained within narrow, exploitative relationships. He serves first as a driver in Dhanbad, then in Delhi, witnessing spectacular wealth accumulation by his masters while his own wages barely cover basic needs and the family obligations imposed upon him. The remittances he sends home disappear into the extended family's demands, leaving him with no capacity to accumulate savings or invest in his own advancement.

Scott's theory helps illuminate why Balram does not experience guilt in conventional terms for his increasingly corrupt actions. For Scott, peasants evaluate economic and political arrangements not by abstract moral principles but by their impact on survival: "The moral touchstone for peasant evaluation of landlords, officials, taxes, corvees or commercial crops is their impact on the chances for survival" (Scott 7). Balram applies this same logic to his own behavior, justifying theft, deception, and ultimately murder as necessary responses to a system that has already violated any moral compact with him.

When Balram begins skimming money from bribes he delivers on behalf of his employer Ashok, he frames this not as theft but as recovering what is rightfully owed: "How quickly the rich can forget the poor! [...] I had to take what was mine" (Adiga 218). This formulation inverts conventional property relations, suggesting that the real theft is the extraction of his labor for minimal wages while his employers accumulate wealth through his services. The bribes themselves—payments to government officials to avoid taxes on the family's coal business—demonstrate the systemic corruption that already structures elite wealth accumulation. Balram's petty corruption thus mirrors and parasitizes the grand corruption of his masters.

The novel emphasizes how Balram's employers, particularly Ashok, preach honesty and fair dealing while engaging in bribery, tax evasion, and the exploitation of loopholes. After Ashok's wife Pinky Madam hits and kills a child while driving drunk, the family pressures Balram to sign a confession taking responsibility for the accident. This incident crystallizes Balram's realization that the masters' moral rhetoric masks their willingness to sacrifice servants' lives for their own convenience: "The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters" (Adiga 145). When elites demand that servants adhere to moral codes that the elites themselves violate with impunity, they forfeit any legitimate moral authority.

Adiga thus presents corruption not as an individual moral failing but as a structural feature of a society where survival requires ethical compromise. Scholars have noted that the novel depicts how "corruption corrupts the minds of the common people that leads the society to indulge in criminal offenses" (Abullais 5), but this formulation risks obscuring Adiga's more radical critique: that corruption is already endemic at every level of Indian society, and that the poor are merely participating in a system designed and maintained by the wealthy and powerful.

The novel's climactic act—Balram's murder of his employer Ashok and theft of a large sum of money—represents the ultimate violation of both legal codes and the traditional patron-client relationship that, however exploitative, once provided some minimal security. This act can be read as the moment when Balram definitively breaks out of the "rooster coop" by refusing the security of servitude in favor of the risks of autonomy.

Scott notes that peasant rebellions typically occur when elites violate the subsistence guarantee: "When those who should offer succor withdraw it, peasants are outraged and from their anger springs peasant rebellion" (Scott 9). Balram's murder of Ashok follows a similar logic. Despite Ashok being portrayed as more sympathetic than his corrupt family members, his willingness to sacrifice Balram for the hit-and-run incident reveals that even "good" masters ultimately prioritize their own interests over their servants' survival. The murder is thus Balram's rebellion against a system that has already marked him for destruction.

After the murder, Balram flees to Bangalore, where he uses the stolen money to establish a taxi service for call center employees. Crucially, he treats his own drivers better than he was treated, providing them with accident insurance and shouldering responsibility when one of his drivers kills a pedestrian. This suggests a form of moral evolution or at least a recognition that entrepreneurial success need not replicate the exploitation he experienced. As Minter observes, this transformation indicates "his awakening of conscience and suggests there is a possibility for true moral reform".

However, the novel resists offering a simplistic redemption narrative. Balram remains pragmatic about his position, bribing police and officials as necessary, and he shows no real remorse for murdering Ashok. Instead, he presents himself as a new kind of Indian entrepreneur—one who has adapted the survival strategies of corruption and amorality to the demands of the globalized economy. His final letters to the Chinese Premier frame him as representative of a new India where success requires discarding outdated moral frameworks inherited from colonialism and traditional society.

One of Adiga's most incisive critiques concerns the hypocrisy of India's elite classes, who benefit from systemic corruption while lamenting the nation's moral decline. The novel repeatedly exposes how wealthy Indians simultaneously exploit servants while expressing concern about poverty, engage in bribery while celebrating India's democracy, and consume Western lifestyles while invoking traditional Indian values when convenient.

Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam exemplify this contradiction. Ashok, educated in America and married to an Indian-American, expresses liberal sentiments about fairness and wants to break from his family's corrupt practices. Yet when confronted with consequences—whether the hit-and-run or his family's demands that he participate in bribery—he invariably capitulates, revealing that his ethical posturing is contingent and self-serving. Pinky Madam initially treats Balram with more humanity than

other servants receive, but she also feels free to drive drunk, endanger others, and then flee to America when the consequences become uncomfortable.

This elite hypocrisy extends to India's political system, which Adiga portrays as fundamentally corrupt despite its democratic facade. The "Great Socialist," a politician who claims to represent the poor while enriching himself through corruption, embodies this contradiction. Elections in Laxmangarh are rigged through intimidation and bribery, yet the winners celebrate India's vibrant democracy. This satirical treatment resonates with postcolonial critiques that argue political independence did not liberate India's poor but merely replaced British elites with Indian ones who perpetuated similar forms of exploitation.

A scholar Khan has observed that Adiga "attacks the democratic system of India" and "exposes the nexus among corrupt politicians, landlords of India". The novel suggests that corruption is not a deviation from the system but the system itself—a mechanism through which elites maintain power and accumulate wealth while the poor remain trapped in servitude. In this context, Balram's corruption represents not moral decay but a rational response to systemic injustice.

The White Tiger situates its narrative explicitly within India's post-liberalization economic boom, examining how globalization transforms the conditions of survival and mobility for different classes. The novel contrasts "India of Light"—the modern, globalized cities where call centers, shopping malls, and international businesses flourish—with "India of Darkness"—the rural villages and urban slums where most Indians continue to live in poverty. This binary reflects the uneven development that characterizes neoliberal globalization, where wealth concentrates in specific sectors and locations while bypassing the majority.

For Balram, globalization initially appears as both promise and trap. The call centers and technology firms creating jobs for educated Indians do not employ people like him; instead, they create demand for drivers, servants, and other service workers who support the new middle class. His employers work for an outsourcing company, emblematic of India's integration into global capitalism, but Balram's role in this economy remains marginal and exploitative. He is necessary to the system yet excluded from its benefits—a position that mirrors Scott's description of how market integration disrupts traditional subsistence guarantees without providing adequate alternatives.

However, Bangalore offers Balram a different vision of how to navigate globalized India. Unlike Delhi, where inherited power and traditional hierarchies dominate, Bangalore presents itself as a city of entrepreneurship and innovation where one's origins matter less than one's ability to adapt and profit. Balram's taxi service for call center workers positions him as a successful entrepreneur, someone who has "made it" in the new India. Yet this success required murder and theft, suggesting that even in

supposedly meritocratic Bangalore, upward mobility for the poor requires violating legal and moral boundaries that the wealthy can navigate legally.

The novel's epistolary frame—Balram writing to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao—reinforces this globalized context while offering a comparative critique. Balram identifies similarities between India and China as "tiger economies" that oppress the poor while enriching elites. By addressing his narrative to a Chinese leader rather than an Indian audience, Balram positions himself as someone who understands India's place in global capitalism and can speak to international leaders as a peer. This rhetorical move both claims authority and satirizes the nationalist rhetoric that celebrates India's rise while ignoring its internal inequalities.

The novel's most provocative aspect is its refusal to definitively judge Balram's actions. Critics have debated whether *The White Tiger* endorses Balram's violence and amorality or critiques it as symptomatic of a corrupted society. This ambiguity is central to Adiga's project, which forces readers to grapple with uncomfortable questions about moral responsibility in conditions of extreme inequality.

On one hand, the novel clearly sympathizes with Balram's position and encourages readers to understand his choices as rational responses to structural violence. The retrospective narration means we encounter Balram as a successful entrepreneur before learning the details of his transformation, predisposing us to see him as protagonist rather than villain. His ironic, self-aware voice and his critiques of elite hypocrisy align him with satirical traditions that puncture social pretensions. Moreover, the novel provides extensive context showing how Indian society has failed Balram and his class—the absent education, the corrupt politics, the systemic exploitation—such that his violent rebellion appears almost inevitable.

On the other hand, Adiga does not entirely absolve Balram. The murder of Ashok, who is portrayed as relatively sympathetic and who arguably did not deserve to die, remains troubling. Balram's willingness to abandon his family to potential retaliation from the landlords demonstrates a self-interest that exceeds mere survival. And while he treats his own drivers better than he was treated, he remains complicit in systems of corruption and exploitation. His final declaration—"I am tomorrow" (Adiga 6)—suggests pride in his transformation but also raises questions about what kind of future India faces if success requires such ethical compromise.

Scholars have noted that the novel shows both "his fall from moral values and his upward social movement through crime and corruption" (Mahal and Markandeshwar), highlighting the inextricable link between Balram's moral descent and economic ascent. This connection is precisely what makes the novel so challenging: it suggests that in contemporary India, genuine upward mobility for the poor may be impossible without moral compromise, that the system itself is structured to make virtue and success incompatible for those born into darkness.

To conclude, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* offers a searing critique of postcolonial India by depicting corruption not as individual moral failing but as a structural feature of a society built on exploitation and inequality. Through the lens of James C. Scott's theory of moral economy, we can understand Balram Halwai's transformation as a modern version of peasant rebellion—a desperate attempt to secure subsistence and autonomy in a system that has systematically violated any social compact with the poor.

The novel demonstrates how India's servant class lives in a perpetual subsistence crisis, where traditional forms of social insurance have been destroyed by colonialism and market integration without adequate replacements. In this context, corruption becomes a survival strategy—a way for the marginalized to parasitize the systemic corruption that already structures elite wealth accumulation. Balram's murder of his employer represents the ultimate transgression of traditional patron-client relationships, but also the moment of liberation from the "rooster coop" that keeps most servants trapped in servitude.

Crucially, Adiga refuses to offer easy moral judgments or redemptive conclusions. The novel acknowledges both the injustice that drives Balram's choices and the troubling consequences of those choices. It suggests that in contemporary India, the promise of upward mobility through globalization and economic liberalization may be illusory for most, achievable only through ethical compromise and violence. This pessimistic vision challenges nationalist narratives celebrating India's economic rise and forces readers to confront the human costs of inequality.

Ultimately, *The White Tiger* asks whether genuine moral accountability is possible in a society structured by corruption and exploitation. Can we judge individuals for their actions when the system itself is unjust? Can there be personal virtue in a fundamentally vicious society? These questions remain unresolved, reflecting the novel's refusal to provide comfortable answers to uncomfortable truths about class, power, and survival in postcolonial India. What remains clear is that Adiga has created a powerful critique of how systemic inequality generates the very corruption and violence that elites then attribute to the moral failings of the poor—a critique that resonates far beyond India's borders to illuminate the dynamics of global capitalism and enduring injustice.

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