

Breaking “Rooster Coop” as Metaphor of False Liberation: An Ambedkarite Reading of *The White Tiger*

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Abstract— *The present paper examines The White Tiger as a story of Balram Halwai, who apparently claims to have broken free from the caste and class trap as a successful entrepreneur. An Ambedkarite reading of this social mobility to entrepreneurship reveals that, despite being rich, one cannot lose caste and class orientations. Informed by Dr B.R. Ambedkar’s propositions to break free from the caste system as explored in Annihilation of Caste, the present study undertakes a close textual analysis of the conditions that make one an entrepreneur. By juxtaposing the metaphor “rooster coop” with Ambedkar’s idea of graded inequality, the study foregrounds that fear and family ties compel one to adopt any means despite the general perception of economic liberty for all. Despite being free, the caste system limits such economic exposure. In other words, one has to resort to violence openly, as Balram confesses his crime in front of readers to become an entrepreneur. Interestingly, economic prosperity can land one in modern society but not in a caste-free society. The study confirms Ambedkar’s warning that economic freedom is not enough to build a just, caste-free society. The study, thus, stresses the application of the Ambedkarite perspective to understand the nexus of caste and economic prosperity reflected in literary text.*



Keywords— *Ambedkarite criticism, Annihilation of Caste, neoliberalism, economic exploitation, caste-capital nexus, Indian English novel, The White Tiger, Dalit chetna, graded inequality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Social mobility is limited by the caste system in India, thereby limiting economic mobility. The social mobility of an individual is a core theme in the literary works of Aravind Adiga. In particular, the novel *The White Tiger* (2008) captures the phenomenon of economic mobility in a society that subtly practises the caste system. Claiming himself as a businessman, Balram Halwai recounts the life of a low-caste driver in the novel. The novel satirises the “India Shining” narrative by portraying Balram as a subaltern agent. Beneath his celebration of economic mobility lies a deeper continuity of caste as an enduring economic hierarchy.

Scholars read *The White Tiger* for its emphasis on class conflict, postcolonial allegory, and the moral ambiguities of neoliberal subjectivity (Shingavi, 2014). The application of the Ambedkarite lens has been rarely

observed to uncover the treatment of caste issues under the graded system of economic exploitation by a few scholars. The graded system, like the caste system, survives and mutates under capitalism. In order to address this gap, the present study seeks to highlight how the caste system is the base of economic prosperity that compels an individual to undertake violent means to succeed in society.

Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, a speech to be delivered in 1936, is the foundational text to understand the caste system as a foundation of economic exploitation, arguably in a neoliberal and globalisation era. Adiga’s novel illustrates Ambedkar’s thesis: without the annihilation of caste, political democracy and market freedom remain hollow. Ambedkarite scholars such as Laura Brueck’s concept of Dalit *chetna* (consciousness) as rhetorical resistance (Brueck, 2014), Toral Gajjarawala’s analysis of literary realism and the “crisis of caste”

(Gajarawala, 2013), and Raj Kumar's framework for Dalit criticism as praxis-oriented reading (Kumar, 2019) have elaborated the implications of caste on economic prosperity. One of the objectives, of this research study is to reveal neoliberal structures in the novel that aligns Ambedkar's "graded inequality"; to analyze Balram's "success" as a failed or partial annihilation of caste; and to establish relevance of Ambedkarite criticism in reading 21st-century Indian English fiction. Thus, the Ambedkarite perspective can be applied to text in order to interrogate representation of caste in the neoliberal era.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars read Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* for exploring globalization, subaltern voice, and moral lapse. Snehal Shingavi, in his 2014 essay, exposes the caste system in the novel and offers an anti-capitalist critique. Shingavi notes, "If the transformation of a poor Bihari from the 'Darkness' to a rich entrepreneur from Bangalore is generative of a critique of a corrupt and exploitative capitalism that produces a caste-based poverty in the first place, then the transition of a middle-caste Halwai into a crypto-Brahmin undermines the very emotional resources of the anti-capitalist critique by relying on caste-bound representational politics" (Shingavi 2014). He argues that Balram's success involves "linking caste to class" but does not produce cohesive or lead to resistive intentions. Its reliance on "passing" and "slumming" strategies appropriate annihilation of caste hierarchy.

Alexander Adkins (2019) focused on the novel's scatological rhetoric as a parody of neoliberal subjectivity. His description brings out "parodies how neoliberalism normalizes misanthropic self-interest as the truth of human nature" using neoliberal disgust. The inversion of traditional moral oppositions exposes the homo economicus of globalization in India. This reading treated caste as secondary to class satire. In contrast, Ambedkarite and Dalit literary criticism offers more precise tools for dissecting the persistence of graded inequality. Laura R. Brueck's *Writing Resistance* (2014) attempted to theorise Dalit chetna or consciousness as a rhetorical strategy. His rejection of Brahmanical realism and assertion seeks to establish collective dignity. Brueck's emphasis on Dalit writing that created a counterpublic who challenged dominant literary aesthetics through socio-political perspectives.

Toral Jatin Gajarawala's *Untouchable Fictions* (2013) argued Dalit writing "Dalitizes" narrative time. His exposition of hidden aesthetics and politics of caste within progressive literary realism sets texts against mainstream realism. It is revelation of process of how caste produces

constraints and formal tendencies which are not attended by progressive narratives.

Raj Kumar's *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019) give a comprehensive perspective that moves beyond mere protest to aesthetic and ideological self-assertion. Kumar addressed the causes of Dalit exploitation, the reasons for emergence of Dalit aesthetics. By practicing Dalit criticism, he treats literature as a site for community identity formation following Ambedkar's thoughts and ideas.

Ambedkar scholarship uses *Annihilation of Caste* to contemporary economic realities. Anupama Kumar (2022) demonstrated the of caste as a "division of labourers". The text precludes worker unity in modern economic contexts. His argument based on scriptural and reformist approaches. In his opinion, the practice of caste leaves caste-Hindu structures intact. Caste traps groups in hereditary occupations while blocking access to higher-wage roles. It is a dynamic process that persists despite claims of economic prosperity.

It is evident that novel *The White Tiger* remained focus of discussion among scholars on economic prosperity, caste and class disgust. However, no major study undertook Ambedkarite reading of the text that centers caste as an economic system which survives and mutate in the neoliberal era. Majority of the critic's reduced their interpretations on the background of class exploitation or satire. On the other hand, an Ambedkarite reading focuses on to bring out the graded inequality, the failure of democratic practices and economic mobility without social reforms. These aspects have been underapplied to literary texts. Hence, this argues that an Ambedkarite critique, grounded in *Annihilation of Caste*, exposes how neoliberal capitalism in *The White Tiger* perpetuates graded economic inequality. Seen from this perspective, Balram Halwai's individual freedom is a false annihilation of caste and class barrier. It is rather reinforcement of structures that Ambedkar sought to destroy. Hence, the Dalit *chetna* informed reading highlights literature's role to practice caste-class less attitude in the 21st century.

III. AMBEDKARITE CRITIQUE OF CASTE AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY

An Ambedkarite perspective reveals caste and class nexus in *The White Tiger*. The attempt is to bring out role of caste and class in reconfiguring the modern economic hierarchy. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936/2014) offers a critique of caste as both a social and economic system. The text brings out caste as a benign "division of labour". He argued that caste functions as a

rigid "division of labourers" into graded, unequal compartments. He writes, "The Caste System is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers. Civilised society undoubtedly needs division of labour. But in no civilised society is division of labour accompanied by this unnatural division of labourers into watertight compartments" (Ambedkar 47). Prevention of associated living forms graded hierarchy. The conjoint experience is essential for true democracy. Justice and equality without the destruction of endogamy will be not be possible in political and economic freedom. Hence, education, agitation, and organization, in Ambedkar's opinion, must accompany economic change; otherwise, reforms merely modernize exploitation.

At present this perspective generates insights necessary to see India's post-1991 market reforms that opens social and economic mobility. Economic reforms in India have reconfigured rather than dismantled caste hierarchies. Upper-caste continue to dominate the access to capital, elite education, corporate jobs, and political power. On the contrary, Dalit labour are precarious, and forced to low-wage job and importantly they remain trapped in stigmatized occupations. Sociological studies confirm that neoliberalism has enabled upper castes to convert traditional social capital into economic advantage through exclusive networks, while lower castes face persistent exclusion even in the "new economy". Neoliberal individualism glorifies narratives of self-made success. It directly echoes Ambedkar's warning, "You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and will never be a whole" (Ambedkar 67). Market-driven freedom, thus, is a seductive illusion that persists structural violence of graded inequality.

Raj Kumar's *Dalit Literature and Criticism* (2019) form a methodological foundation of Ambedkarite lens to literary texts. Kumar advocate an Ambedkarite standpoint criticism. He treats literature not as neutral aesthetic object but as praxis. Dalit chetna (consciousness) awakened will expose and challenge the caste-capital nexus. The perspective allows an investigation of how even mainstream or non-Dalit texts unconsciously dramatize the persistence of caste under contemporary economic prosperity. In other words, instead of taken for granted the mainstream realism which foregrounds collective dignity, ideological self-assertion, and the demand for holistic social transformation, an Ambedkarite perspective strips illusions of a just society.

Applying the perspective to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* reveals that the main character Balram Halwai

emergence from bonded village labour to entrepreneurial success in Bangalore as a result of violence and betrayal. Apparently, this is a celebration of the disruptive energy of globalization. However, an Ambedkarite reading exposes how the text unwittingly confirms Ambedkar's diagnosis: the "rooster coop" of fear, family obligation, and graded hierarchy survives migration and market reform. Balram's "white tiger" status does not annihilate caste. Economic prosperity allows one to climb next levels but within the same hierarchical structure. In fact, it is replication of exploitation by becoming a new "master" who preys on those below him. The landlord-politician-business nexus in the novel illustrates the fusion of traditional caste power with global capital, where upper-caste families control resources while lower-caste bodies provide cheap, disposable labour. The study reveals that in an age where traditional caste, and class barriers seem dissolving given economic or market conditions to buy whatever one wants to, Ambedkarite criticism allows us to see the role of caste as a base of division of labourers, in mutating due to lack of education, agitation, and organized resistance.

The "Rooster Coop": Metaphor of Graded Inequality

An Ambedkarite reading of novel reveals that "rooster coop" as a precise literary embodiment of Ambedkar's concept of caste as a "division of labourers" as a graded watertight compartment. It prevent "associated living" (Ambedkar 47). The metaphor dramatizes how fear, family loyalty, and internalized hierarchy keep the oppressed passive even when they witness their own exploitation. This is evident when Balram says, "The greatest thing to come out of this country... is the Rooster Coop. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers... They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country" (Adiga 147). "...But where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began, I could not tell: no servant can ever tell what the motives of his heart are... We are made mysteries to ourselves by the Rooster Coop we are locked in" (Adiga 160). "Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters or entrepreneurs. The coop is guarded from the inside" (Adiga 166).

These lines indicate that Adiga unwittingly illustrates Ambedkar's thesis that caste is not a benign division of labour but a system that fragments the working class and blocks collective resistance. In the village economy of Laxmangarh, Balram's Halwai caste is locked into menial service for the landowning *Thekedars* that is "Stork," "Mongoose," and Ashok family. Their presence reproduces hereditary servitude. Balram's migration to

Delhi does not dismantle this coop. Rather it merely relocates it within the global capital circuit wherein we find companies outsource services, luxury cars, and foreign investment remain caste-coded. Upper-caste run the companies who were once traditional landlords. They accumulate power in neoliberal economic conditions. Meanwhile the Dalits stay trapped in precarious roles. This confirms Ambedkar's warning that without annihilating endogamy and graded inequality, economic "reforms" only modernize exploitation rather than end it.

Balram Halwai's owing of business as a "freedom" but a false annihilation of caste. Balram murdered Ashok and rises as a Bangalore entrepreneur. Apparently, he is successful in escaping from the coop. An Ambedkarite reading exposes this as a false annihilation: Ambedkar demanded collective change through education, agitation, and organization, but not individual escape via violence and deception (Ambedkar 57). Balram merely replicates the hierarchy he fled. Adiga writes, "Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat" (Adiga 173; the act is narrated as the culmination of his internal conflict). Further, Balram says, "I have switched sides. I've made it. I've broken out of the coop" (Adiga 285; Balram's triumphant declaration after establishing his taxi business in Bangalore). In addition, Balram's description of his new life running a fleet of taxis: he now employs drivers whom he treats with the same suspicion and control once directed at him, admitting he has become "another master" who exploits those below (Adiga 276–77).

From an Ambedkarite standpoint, Balram's "success" is illusory. His violence replaces personal goal for collective praxis. He does not dismantle caste but climbs within it. He is now a new "Big Belly" who preys on "Small Bellies." This mirrors Ambedkar's critique of liberal individualism built on caste foundations: "You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste" (Ambedkar 57). The novel's neoliberal celebration of self-making thus exposes its own limits—individual "freedom" leaves the graded structure intact and merely circulates exploitation.

Intersection of Caste, Class, and Consumption

The White Tiger portrays how economic prosperity setting where in caste is not dissolved but sustains and conceals it. For instance, the Ashok family's lifestyle, Pinky Madam's American-style individualism, and Bangalore's call-centre economy reveal how modern institutions reproduce graded inequality. It is clear in Ashok's dismissive comment on Balram: "He's half-baked. The country is full of people like him... And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy... to

characters like these" (Adiga 30). In addition, Balram reflects, "The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced... Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay" (Adiga 9).

In Bangalore, Balram observes the call-centre culture where "half-baked" Dalit/Bahujan workers power the global economy yet remain excluded from its rewards, while upper-caste networks control contracts and capital (Adiga 270–72). Ambedkarite reading exposes how the liberal markets and "democracy" function as new vehicles for graded inequality. The "half-baked" trope underscores Ambedkar's point that caste denies genuine education and social mobility, trapping the oppressed in partial knowledge while upper castes monopolize full access to capital and power. Even the digital economy reproduces caste networks: consumption (luxury apartments, foreign cars, American individualism) becomes the new endogamy that sustains privilege. Modern institutions—markets, education, parliamentary democracy—thus confirm Ambedkar's insight: without annihilating caste, they merely modernize the division of labourers.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* unintentionally confirms Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's proposition in *Annihilation of Caste* that neoliberalism does not annihilate caste but modernizes it. Despite economic or financial growth, caste reconfigures "division of labourers" into graded, unequal compartments. The novel's central "rooster coop" metaphor dramatizes this with chilling precision. Balram declares, "The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop" (Adiga 102), describing how roosters witness their brothers' slaughter yet remain passive, "trapped in the Rooster Coop" (Adiga 104). He adds that "We are made mysteries to ourselves by the Rooster Coop we are locked in" (Adiga 111) and that "Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators... The coop is guarded from the inside" (Adiga 115). His migration from Laxmangarh to Delhi and Bangalore merely relocates this coop within capital circuits. The landlord Stork-Ashok family and its rich status in terms of luxury cars, and investments keeps economic exploitation caste-coded. Balram is "half-baked" entrepreneur. This confirms Ambedkar's insight that caste denies genuine education and associated living but he as Dalit-Bahujan labour remain trapped in precarious roles. This doesn't matter whether it is digital economy or traditionally landlord owned labor family. Thus, the novel unintentionally proves that ability to buy things in market doesn't make one free from graded inequality.

This Ambedkarite reading highlights the urgent necessity of extending Dalit literary criticism beyond

Dalit-authored texts. As pointed out by Raj Kumar (2019) Ambedkarite reading perspective exposes limit of freedom assumed by a Dalit. Balram's entrepreneurial "freedom" as he says, "I have switched sides. I've made it. I've broken out of the coop" (Adiga 285) after murdering Ashok. He seems successful in annihilating the system, but he, instead replicates the very hierarchy he escaped by becoming "another master" who exploits his own drivers with the same suspicion he once endured (Adiga 276–77). The satirical first-person voice remains trapped in neoliberal self-making logic that Ambedkar critiqued as insufficient without collective education-agitation-organization.

The novel's ending underscores the limits of individual resistance and the imperative for collective Ambedkarite praxis in 21st-century literary studies. Balram's final monologue reveals profound isolation and paranoia despite material success (Adiga 280–81). His vision of freedom in terms of "even if they throw me in jail... it was all worthwhile to know... what it means not to be a servant" (Adiga 276) is contrast to Ambedkar's call for "associated living" based on liberty, equality, and fraternity. In want of Dalit *chetna*, the narrative ends in neoliberal individualism.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, read from Ambedkarite perspective shows that caste cannot be annihilated in modernised society in 21st-century India. The paper pointed out that critics saw the novel as a depiction of class and postcolonial views. Less attempts have been made to apply Ambedkar's ideas to read the text. Scholars such as Shingavi and Adkins focused on capitalism and individual success, this study adds Ambedkarite perspective. Holding *Annihilation of Caste* as foundational text for revealing of caste as a "division of labourers" that prevents associated living implies that market-oriented wealth and freedom is meaningless without social reform. The analysis of the "rooster coop" metaphor, Balram's false freedom, and neoliberal consumption further proved that individual entrepreneurship only moves caste exploitation from villages to cities. Ambedkarite criticism is a tool for reading Indian English novels and urges annihilation of caste through collective education, agitation, and organization.

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