

Big Bellies and Small Bellies: Class Conflict and Social Inequality in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

SONVEER SINGH RATHOR¹, DR. AMRESH BABOO YADAV²

¹(Research Scholar), Department of English Studies and Research
Agra College, Agra, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra

¹(Assistant Professor), Department of English Studies and Research
Agra College, Agra, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra

Abstract— Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* presents a sharp critique of class conflict, social inequality, and the unequal distribution of power in contemporary India. This paper examines how the novel exposes the deep divide between the privileged "big bellies" and the impoverished "small bellies," represented through the contrasting worlds of the wealthy and the underprivileged. Balram Halwai's journey from a poor village in Bihar to a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore reveals the structural barriers that restrict social mobility and perpetuate economic exploitation. The novel portrays poverty, caste hierarchy, corruption, political manipulation, and servitude as interconnected forces sustaining class inequality. Through Balram's transformation from servant to businessman, Adiga questions the moral and social costs of escaping poverty within an unequal system. The study argues that *The White Tiger* portrays class conflict not merely as an economic struggle but as a wider contest over dignity, freedom, identity, and power in modern Indian society.

Keywords— Class Conflict, Social Inequality, Marxist Criticism, Social Mobility, Poverty and Economic Exploitation.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) presents a powerful critique of class conflict and social inequality in contemporary India. Through Balram Halwai's journey from a poor village boy to a successful entrepreneur, the novel exposes the sharp divide between the privileged and the marginalized. Adiga represents this division through the metaphor of "Big Bellies" and "Small Bellies," symbolizing the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and opportunity. The relationship between Balram and his master, Ashok, further reveals the exploitation inherent in the master-servant system. This paper examines class hierarchy, poverty, caste, corruption, and social mobility through a Marxist perspective.

The concept of Shining India gets momentum with the rise of India as a global player after its adoption of neo-liberal economic policies. It is bandied about

that the new economic order would change the face of India. It will usher in economic prosperity and will also bridge the wild gulf that exists between the rich and the poor. As India becomes a market for the West, new social structures have appeared in India with the spread of a capitalist economy. During this transformation, metropolitan cities of India emerge as a strong site for consumption driven economy. This leads to unprecedented increase in the proliferation of metropolitan literature. The literature focuses on the dark side of India. The Indian writers, especially those settled in the West, pander to the West by constructing and disseminating the negative image of India. The surprise entry of *The White Tiger* on the literary scene badly dented the hitherto progressive image of India that the novels of the gone by era had helped construct over the years. The novel by Adiga was dubbed as poverty tourism which seemingly addresses the voyeuristic western interest with the explosion of third world realities. The novel also nails the lie of the narrative of the economic success story of India which the country seems to be keen on projecting to the third world.

The novel punctures the inflated tires of India's success story, inviting strong reactions from critics and readers as well. But, Adiga seems to be undisturbed by such criticism. He says that he sees his role equal to that of Zola, who acted as a politico-social conscience of the nineteenth century France which was entering capitalism without resolving the human question of peasant and laborers. Zola was a naturalist who believed that heredity and environment had an influence on the character of an individual. But the movement was also conscious of the ill-effects of capitalism on the character of an individual. Adiga too thinks on the same lines. He holds on to the view that policies of economic liberalization have proved beneficial for a handful of upper class people, but the status of the underprivileged remain unaffected. In the chapter

under reference, a host of issues concerning the poor and the downtrodden have been taken up. The focus, however, of the author is to bust the myth of Shinning India. Big Bellies symbolize the rich and the powerful. They wield power. They control resources. The rich and powerful exploit the poor through various structures like caste, religion and gender. A perpetual battle goes between the haves and have-nots, and the have-nots have not succeeded in their efforts to overcome their miseries. Adiga here seems to suggest that revolution by proletarian may not be happening in India, but the poor and the marginalized, though slowly, have learnt how to come out of the coop. Thus, the chapter Big Bellies v/s Small Bellies projects social and economic inequalities that exist in India and how these inequalities have impacted the lives of millions of Indians.

In *The White Tiger*, this conflict is crystallized through the striking metaphor of “men with big bellies” and “men with small bellies” (*The White Tiger* 64). The metaphor becomes a representation of two economically and socially divided sections of Indian society. Adiga’s fiction examines the social and economic consequences of a system in which wealth, political influence, caste privilege, and social status determine access to opportunities. His characters frequently inhabit a world divided between those who possess resources and those who struggle merely to survive. The poor remain excluded from the major structures of economic power and are compelled to accept servitude, debt, exploitation, and humiliation as ordinary features of life. In this context, Leonard’s definition of social marginality is particularly relevant. He observes that marginalized people remain outside “the major arena of capitalistic productive and reproductive activity” and consequently experience “involuntary social marginality” (Leonard 181). Adiga dramatizes precisely such marginality in *The White Tiger*, where the poor are economically necessary to the system but socially excluded from its benefits. M. Burton and Carolyn Kagan similarly explain the condition of marginalization:

Marginalization is at the core of exclusion from fulfilling and full social lives at individual interpersonal and societal levels. People who are marginalized have relatively little control over their lives and the resources available to them; they may become stigmatized and are often at the receiving end

of negative public attitudes. Their opportunities to make social contributions may be limited and they may develop low self-confidence and self-esteem. (Burton and Kagan 197–208)

This concept of marginalization provides an important framework for understanding the condition of Balram Halwai and the poor inhabitants of Laxmangarh. Their poverty is not simply an individual failure; it is produced and sustained by a deeply unequal social and economic structure. They possess little control over land, education, employment, political power, or economic resources. Their dependence upon landlords and employers consequently becomes a mechanism of class domination. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga transforms the traditional representation of the poor by allowing Balram to become an articulate observer of the social system that oppresses him. Balram is not merely a passive victim of poverty. He recognizes the mechanisms of exploitation and gradually understands that the Indian social order is constructed around unequal access to power. His movement from a poor village boy to a successful entrepreneur therefore becomes simultaneously a story of social mobility and a critique of the system that makes such mobility extraordinarily difficult. His success, however, does not represent a complete victory over inequality; rather, it demonstrates how an individual must often adopt the methods of the powerful in order to escape the position of the powerless. Balram’s consciousness is significant because *The White Tiger* makes the underclass speak about the system that has historically silenced it. His narrative exposes the contradiction between India’s economic development and the continuing poverty of millions of people. The growth of cities, industries, technology, and entrepreneurship does not automatically eliminate social inequality. Instead, Adiga suggests that economic development can coexist with extreme exploitation when its benefits are unequally distributed. Balram’s voice therefore becomes the voice of a class that sees the promises of modern India but remains excluded from their advantages.

The central metaphor of “big bellies” and “small bellies” captures this contradiction with particular force. Balram observes: “The poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like the poor.” (*The White Tiger* 225)

The statement is both humorous and deeply ironic. The “small belly” represents hunger, poverty, deprivation, and economic insecurity, whereas the “big belly” represents abundance, wealth, privilege, and access to resources. The difference between the two is therefore not merely physical; it symbolizes the unequal distribution of material resources. The rich possess the luxury of worrying about excess, while the poor struggle to obtain basic necessities. Through this contrast, Adiga converts the human body into a visible symbol of class division. The metaphor also corresponds to Adiga’s distinction between the “India of Light” and the “India of Darkness.” Balram declares: “I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness” (*The White Tiger* 14).

The four landlords the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar, and the Raven embody the economic and political power of the dominant class. They control the land, river, roads, and other resources of Laxmangarh. Their enormous wealth is sustained by the labour and indebtedness of the villagers. Balram describes their privileged existence: “All four of the Animals lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh the landlords’ quarters. They had their own temples inside the mansions, and their wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed” (*The White Tiger* 25). Furthermore, this depicts the viciousness of the typical Bihari landlord class. They roll in luxury due to the back-breaking work of the poor. The resentment of the exploited class keeps on seething in their hearts turns the white tiger, adopts his ways, roars and wreaks his vengeance on this privileged and proud class. C.L. Wayper in *Political Thought* writes: “Circumstances do not make man; man makes circumstances. No principle decides whether the action is good or bad. It is the circumstances that determine the action” (Wayper 199). Arundhati Roy while taking dig at the corrupt system writes in her essay ‘*Peace is War*’: “neoliberal capitalists control democracies by reducing the press, parliament and judiciary to commodities that are available to the highest bidder” (Roy 1-25).

The image of the high-walled mansions is significant because the walls symbolize the social distance between the landlords and the villagers. The rich possess private resources, private spaces, and private security, while the poor depend upon the same powerful landlords for employment and survival. The

spatial division of the village consequently becomes a representation of class division. The landlords’ power is reinforced by debt and economic dependence. The poor are compelled to work for those who control land and resources, creating a cycle in which poverty reproduces itself. Balram’s family experiences this system directly. His father’s poverty, his brother Krishna’s suffering, and Balram’s own employment as a servant demonstrate how economic deprivation passes from one generation to another. The novel thus presents poverty not as a temporary condition but as a structural mechanism of class control. Corruption further strengthens this unequal system. Adiga demonstrates that public institutions intended to support the poor are frequently appropriated by individuals in positions of authority. Balram recalls the corruption surrounding his school’s midday meal programme: “There was supposed to be free food at my school a government programme gave every boy three rotis, or yellow daal, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never saw rotis, or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money” (*The White Tiger* 33).

This incident illustrates how corruption directly affects the poorest members of society. The stolen food is not simply an administrative irregularity; it represents the appropriation of resources from children who already suffer from poverty. Education, nutrition, and government welfare become instruments through which the poor are further disadvantaged. The contrast between the rich and the poor becomes even sharper when Balram moves from rural Bihar to the urban environment of Gurgaon. His employment as a chauffeur provides him with an opportunity to observe the lifestyle of the wealthy from close proximity. He enters the world of luxury but remains socially excluded from it. He drives expensive cars, enters elite residential spaces, and serves wealthy employers, yet he does not possess the economic or social status that would allow him to become their equal. His position illustrates the paradox of class mobility: the poor may enter the spaces of the rich as workers without necessarily becoming members of the privileged class. Balram gradually recognizes that servitude is not simply an individual relationship between employer and employee. It is part of a wider class structure. The servant is expected to obey, remain loyal, suppress personal desires, and accept humiliation. His employers enjoy freedom because Balram and other

servants perform the labour that sustains their lifestyle. Thus, the luxury of the “big bellies” depends upon the labour of the “small bellies.” Balram’s transformation demonstrates the psychological consequences of this unequal system. Initially, he accepts his position as a servant because poverty leaves him with few alternatives. However, exposure to wealth generates a growing awareness of the enormous difference between his life and that of his employers. His desire for social mobility gradually becomes stronger than his commitment to conventional morality. He begins to understand that the rules of society appear to protect the rich more effectively than the poor.

This process culminates in Balram’s decision to reject servitude and establish himself as an entrepreneur. His transformation is therefore deeply ambiguous. On one hand, he represents the possibility of individual mobility; on the other hand, his success is achieved through violence, betrayal, and corruption. Adiga consequently avoids presenting capitalism or entrepreneurship as simple solutions to poverty. Instead, the novel asks what happens when a person trapped within an exploitative system acquires the desire and opportunity to escape it. Balram’s rise can be interpreted through the Marxist opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The landlords and wealthy businessmen possess capital and control economic resources, whereas servants, drivers, laborers, and farmers possess little beyond their labour. The rich accumulate wealth through systems that depend upon the labour of the poor. Balram’s rebellion therefore reflects the resentment produced by unequal economic relations. Yet Adiga complicates the Marxist model because Balram does not seek to destroy the class system. Instead, he seeks to cross its boundaries and become one of the powerful.

This explains the significance of the “big belly” metaphor. Balram does not ultimately reject the world of the “big bellies”; he wants to enter it. His dream is not to abolish inequality but to escape the position of the “small belly.” His transformation consequently exposes one of the central contradictions of contemporary capitalism: individual success may be possible, but it does not necessarily eliminate structural inequality. One person can move from the exploited class into the exploiting class while millions remain trapped below. Adiga’s representation of the four landlords also

reveals how class power is intertwined with caste and political influence. The privileged class possesses not only money but also networks of authority that protect its interests. The poor, by contrast, lack effective political representation. Their economic dependence prevents them from challenging the system openly. Consequently, class inequality is reinforced by caste hierarchy, corruption, political patronage, and social intimidation.

The novel also demonstrates that rapid economic development does not automatically produce social equality. India’s emergence as a global economic power exists alongside villages marked by hunger, unemployment, inadequate education, debt, and social oppression. The contrast between Gurgaon’s modern buildings and Laxmangarh’s poverty becomes a geographical representation of the unequal development of the nation. The “Light” and the “Darkness” are therefore not simply two locations; they are two socioeconomic realities existing within the same country. The relationship between Balram and Ashok further intensifies the class conflict. Ashok is relatively more sympathetic than the other members of his family, but he remains a beneficiary of the same system that exploits Balram. Their relationship appears personal on the surface, yet it remains structured by class hierarchy. Balram serves Ashok, drives him, waits for him, and adjusts his life according to his employer’s needs. Their apparent intimacy cannot erase the economic inequality separating them. Through Balram’s journey, Adiga exposes the human consequences of extreme economic inequality. His protagonist’s transformation from a poor village boy and chauffeur into an entrepreneur demonstrates that social mobility is possible, but it also reveals its disturbing cost. Balram succeeds not because the social system becomes fairer, but because he learns to operate according to its ruthless logic. Thus, *The White Tiger* offers a powerful critique of an India in which economic progress coexists with persistent poverty and class domination. The metaphor of “big bellies” and “small bellies” ultimately becomes a compelling symbol of the unequal distribution of wealth, power, dignity, and opportunity in contemporary Indian society.

The poor people in *The White Tiger* have to endure the burden of poverty at almost every stage of their lives. The opportunities available to them are repeatedly taken away by corrupt institutions, social

hierarchies, and economic exploitation. Balram's father, a poor rickshaw puller, represents the vulnerable laboring class whose life is marked by poverty, inadequate healthcare, and social neglect. His death in a charity hospital reveals the indifference of institutions towards the poor. Through such experiences, Adiga demonstrates that poverty is not merely the absence of money but a condition that limits access to health, education, dignity, and social mobility. The poor are deprived not only of material resources but also of opportunities that might enable them to improve their lives. Balram gradually discovers that the world of the wealthy operates according to rules very different from those governing the poor. In the "India of Light," money and political influence determine success, while corruption becomes an ordinary mechanism of acquiring power. During his employment as a chauffeur, Balram observes the close relationship between wealth, political influence, and bribery. His experiences expose the contradiction between India's economic development and the continuing deprivation of its working classes. The rich are able to manipulate institutions through money, whereas the poor are compelled to serve those institutions and the people who control them. Adiga therefore presents contemporary India as a society in which economic advancement exists alongside deep class inequality. The servant-master relationship is particularly important to Adiga's representation of class conflict. The servants are economically and socially inferior to their masters, although they remain constantly exposed to the wealth and privileges of the upper classes. They clean their houses, drive their cars, carry their belongings, and perform the labor that sustains their luxurious lifestyles. Yet they remain excluded from the benefits enjoyed by their employers. This relationship demonstrates how class inequality operates through everyday practices of dependence and obedience. The servant is physically close to wealth but socially distant from it. Thus, the servant becomes an important symbol of the "small belly" in contrast to the "big belly" of the master.

The narrative of *The White Tiger* can broadly be understood through three stages of Balram's social journey. The first concerns his childhood in Laxmangarh, which he identifies with the "India of Darkness." The second follows his movement into the urban world as a chauffeur serving Ashok and his family. The third presents Balram as a successful

entrepreneur in Bangalore after he has escaped what he calls the "Rooster Coop." These three stages trace not only an individual journey but also the movement between different class positions. Balram moves from the exploited rural poor to the urban servant class and finally to the economically independent entrepreneur. The concept of the "Rooster Coop" is central to understanding this class structure. Adiga uses the metaphor to describe the psychological and social mechanisms that keep poor people obedient to their masters. Balram explains that the poor remain trapped because they have been conditioned to accept their position. Fear, family obligations, caste, poverty, loyalty, religion, and social expectations combine to prevent them from challenging the established order. The Rooster Coop therefore represents a system in which exploitation survives not only through physical force but also through psychological conditioning. Adiga's concern with the economic and social division between the privileged and the underprivileged extends beyond *The White Tiger* and can also be observed in his other works, particularly *Between the Assassinations*. However, *The White Tiger* provides the most concentrated representation of this conflict through the metaphor of "big bellies" and "small bellies." The contrast between the wealthy and the poor is not merely a difference in income; it reflects unequal access to food, education, employment, political influence, social dignity, and opportunities for advancement. Adiga's characters reveal a society in which the privileged accumulate wealth while the poor remain trapped in conditions of labour, dependence, and deprivation.

The condition of the working class is particularly significant in this context. Characters such as Chenayya in *Between the Assassinations* represent the labouring poor who work continuously for the comfort of wealthier sections of society. His physical labour and economic deprivation illustrate the contradiction at the heart of class society: those who perform the hardest labour frequently receive the smallest share of economic benefits. Chenayya's bitter observation that "Those who are born poor in this country are fated to die poor" (*Between the Assassinations* 193) reflects the sense of hopelessness produced by structural inequality. Although this example belongs to another work, it parallels Balram's experience in *The White Tiger*, where poverty similarly appears as a condition reproduced from one generation to another. This

relationship between labour and wealth is central to the metaphor of the “big bellies” and “small bellies.” The rich are able to enjoy comfort because the poor perform the labour necessary to maintain that comfort. Servants drive cars, clean houses, carry luggage, deliver goods, and perform countless forms of invisible labour. Yet their contribution does not guarantee social mobility. In *The White Tiger*, Balram’s work as a chauffeur illustrates this contradiction. He remains constantly surrounded by wealth without possessing it himself. His proximity to the rich makes him increasingly conscious of the economic gulf separating him from his employers.

The White Tiger presents a compelling examination of the social and economic divisions that shape contemporary India. The recurring imagery of “big bellies” and “small bellies” captures the stark contrast between abundance and deprivation, privilege and vulnerability, authority and dependence. Through Balram Halwai’s movement from Laxmangarh to Bangalore, the novel traces the aspirations of an individual born into poverty who refuses to accept a predetermined social position. His experience reveals how caste, debt, corruption, inadequate education, and servitude restrict upward mobility and sustain inherited disadvantage. The “Rooster Coop” further illustrates the psychological and social mechanisms that encourage obedience among the oppressed. Balram’s escape from this confinement, however, remains deeply ambivalent. His rise does not transform the structures that produced his suffering; rather, he adopts many of the practices associated with those who once dominated him. Consequently, his achievement exposes the moral contradictions of a society where advancement may require complicity with injustice. Adiga ultimately challenges the celebratory narrative of economic progress by drawing attention to those excluded from its rewards. *The White Tiger* therefore remains a significant critique of entrenched hierarchy, revealing the urgent need for dignity, opportunity, and genuine social justice.

Powerlessness.” *Community Development Journal*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1998, pp. 195–205.

- [4] Leonard, Peter. *Personality and Ideology: Social Work and Political Theory*. Macmillan, 1984.
- [5] Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Penguin Books, 2002.
- [6] Roy, Arundhati. “Peace Is War.” *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Flamingo, 2002, pp. 1–22.
- [7] Wayper, C. L. *Political Thought*. University Paperbacks, Methuen, 1965.

WORKS CITED

- [1] Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2008.
- [2] Adiga, Aravind. *Between the Assassinations*. Picador, 2008.
- [3] Burton, Mark, and Carolyn Kagan. “Rethinking Empowerment: Shared Action against