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## Perils of Class System and Disproportion of Income – A Study of Arvind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*

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### Abstract

India’s class system and income disparities are deeply ingrained and complex issue. India’s traditional class system, which dates back over 3000 years, has played a significant role in shaping the country’s social hierarchy. India’s class system is characterized by small elite class, a growing middle class, and a large underclass. The elite class consists of industrialists, politicians, and high-ranking government officials, while underclass includes millions of poor farmers, laborers and slum dwellers. India’s income inequality is among the highest in the world. According to a report, the top 10% of India’s population holds 77% of the country’s wealth, while the bottom 50% holds just 4%. Arvind Adiga’s novel “The White Tiger” offers a scathing critique of the Indian caste system and the gross income disparities that exist in the country. Through Balram’s story, the novel highlights the complex interplay between caste, class, and economic opportunities in modern India.

Keywords: Class-System, Income Disparities, Social-hierarchy, Discrimination, Exploitation, Elite Class.

### INTRODUCTION

India’s economic surge since 1991 has catapulted it to becoming one of the world’s fastest-growing economies, boasting the twelfth-largest economy globally and the fourth-largest in terms of purchasing power. This growth has been accompanied by profound socio-cultural shifts, including the expansion of the middle class, the proliferation of consumer culture, and revolutionary advancements in media, technology, and lifestyle. However, beneath India’s gleaming façade lies a stark reality: entrenched caste-based disparities, crippling poverty, and uneven development persist. The caste system has perpetually fragmented Indian society, with landowners, industrialists, and the upper classes wielding control over impoverished

peasants, laborers, and working-class individuals. The Dalit community, in particular, remains mired in extreme poverty, lacking access to land, education, and employment opportunities. While many Dalits have resigned themselves to their circumstances, a growing number of underprivileged individuals are rising up against the oppressive caste system, shattering their centuries-long silence to raise awareness and spark change. This paper examines the perilous consequences of India’s class system and income disparities through the lens of Arvind Adiga’s novel, *The White Tiger*.

### Discussion

Arvind Adiga gained global recognition with his debut novel, *The White Tiger*, which won the

prestigious Man Booker Prize in 2008. The novel exposes the stark disparity between India's thriving economy and the dire circumstances of its marginalized communities, trapped in debilitating poverty. Through a candid portrayal, Adiga critiques modern India as a society plagued by corruption and oppression. He sheds light on the bleak realities or rural Bihar, highlighting the exploitative nature of feudal landlords and envisioning a more just society.

Arvind Adiga's experiences as a journalist and traveler, particularly his visits to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, inspired him to write *The White Tiger*. He witnessed a transforming India, where migrant laborers were shedding traditional values and social norms. Adiga aimed to portray this new India, exploring the complexities of master-servant relationships, class divisions, and income disparities. The novel hints at the simmering discontent among the servant class, which threatens to boil over into violence. Through his protagonist Balram, Adiga subverts the traditional archetype of the ideal servant, instead presenting a complex anti-hero who challenges societal norms. Adiga himself says,

"My novel attempts to look at what kind of man would be prepared to break the structure. You can in essence say it is a warning story, a fable of things that might be ahead for India".

The novel tells the rags-to-riches story of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, who is referred to as the "White Tiger," a rare individual born once every hundred years. Balram hails from Laxmangarh in Bihar and is the son of a rickshaw puller. Despite being intelligent and showing promise as a child, he is forced to leave school early, working in a small tea shop and breaking coal to support his family. Determined to earn more, he learns to drive. He eventually meets a wealthy landlord and power broker known as "The Stork" due to his long nose, who hires him as a driver. Balram becomes the chauffeur for The Stork's son, Ashok, who has returned from the U.S. and settled in Gurugram, near New Delhi. There, Balram drives Ashok and his wife to high-end malls, exposing him to the glittering image of "Shining" and "Rising" India. He becomes acutely aware of the wealth, corruption, and

opportunities around him, but also of his own inability to ever reach that level of prosperity. After deep reflection, Balram concludes that the only way to break free and join the wealthy class is through drastic action. He kills his master, Ashok, with an empty whisky bottle and escapes to Bangalore. There, he adopts the name Ashok Sharma, starts his own Taxi Company, and becomes a successful entrepreneur in India's most advanced metropolitan city.

The novel illustrates how today's economy fosters socio-economic divisions, restricting opportunities, social mobility, and access to rights and pleasures that should be available to all. The caste system in India perpetuates these divisions, splitting the population into higher and lower social classes. As Balram reflects,

*"Please understand your Excellency. India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness."* (Adiga 14)

In his journey from 'Darkness' to 'Enlightenment', Balram witnesses widespread corruption, inequality, and abject poverty. The harsh reality of the so-called "modern, rising, and shining India" sharply contrasts with the value-based traditional India, as Balram observes:

"To sum up – 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" (Adiga 64).

This disparity in income results in the rich getting richer while the poor become poorer. A central metaphor in the novel is the Rooster Coop, symbolizing the trap Balram faces. He is caged like the chickens in the coop and, as a "White Tiger," must break free. Balram explains:

"The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're the 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 173-74).

Balram comes to believe that liability for the suffering of the servants also lies partly with the mentality of the servant class. He explains that money or power alone does not run the system, but rather the loyal attitude of the poor towards the rich precludes any thoughts of rising against them. Referring to this as a mentality of "Perpetual Servitude", Balram asserts that this ideology is so strong in the servant class that,

"You can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse." (Adiga 14)

The poor are stuck in their societal roles, with no access to the freedom of thought, profession, money, or time. Balram contends that individual action is the way to break out of the "rooster coop." He refuses to be a "rooster" waiting to be "eaten," and instead strives to become one of the "eaters." Balram flips the traditional master-servant dynamic, becoming a "master-like servant."

Balram's story depicts a gradual decline from innocence to corruption, fuelled by a cunning mind and the stark inequality of urban life, which undermines all notions of social justice. When entering a mall, he sees the world of the privileged: "I was conscious of a perfume in the air, of golden light, of people in T-shirts and jeans who were eyeing me strangely" (Adiga 152). Balram, who has caught a glimpse of the rich, yearns for their comforts, yet knows they are out of his reach. He realizes that he must abandon his middle-class values if he hopes to succeed in this world of opportunity and corruption. In a violent act, Balram breaks free from his chains:

"I pierced his neck and his lifeblood spurted into my eyes. I was blind. I was a free man" (Adiga 246).

The act of killing gives him the freedom he craves and he asserts, "All I wanted was the chance to be a man—and for that, one murder was enough" (Adiga 273). Balram not only becomes an entrepreneur, but also a murderer. He takes pride in his act:

"I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day,

just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant" (Adiga 276).

In twenty-first-century India, the deep-rooted corruption and inequality are so pervasive that the only way for a poor person to improve their life is through aggression, even if it means theft or murder. Adiga sends a stern message to policymakers, showing that material success in this society can be achieved through both benefaction and unethical means. Balram's rebellion is a wake-up call to Indian society that the traditional social structure is crumbling. As Molly Joseph M states:

"The novel encapsulates the resilience of the marginalized. Balram pushes his way up in life through tactful resistance and perseverance. He outlives the harrowing experience of suffering and suppression that is the average lot of his kith and kin, struggles hard to become a driver, and ultimately emerges into a self-taught, flourishing entrepreneur by slitting the throat of his master" (77).

Balram realizes that his impoverished state makes him both a misfit and unfit for society. Though he understands the consequences of his crime, he knows that avoiding risk guarantees failure. He believes that to succeed, he must be tough-skinned, almost "pachydermatous." Balram symbolizes the new generation of Indian men who are willing to commit heinous acts to achieve their goals.

### **Conclusion**

Adiga highlights the corrupt Indian caste system by showing how Balram manipulates the system to his advantage, ultimately becoming an entrepreneur. Balram's rise in society exemplifies how those high on the caste ladder can bribe officials to cover up crimes, rig political votes, and shop in exclusive malls, while those born into poverty and low castes remain trapped. Balram is a rare exception, having experienced both sides of the caste system and managed to climb the social ladder. Adiga suggests that for the underprivileged, violence may be the only way forward. His novel serves as a warning about the future of India.

To conclude, bridging the gap between the rich and poor is essential for the true progress of the country. If the divide continues to widen, tensions will eventually erupt. The solution lies in ensuring that the benefits of growth and advancement are shared across all layers of society.

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