

The Journey from ‘Darkness’ to ‘Light’: Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* and the Phenomenon of Rural to Urban Internal Migration in India

Mohua Dutta

Abstract

Aravind Adiga’s debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), has over the years been widely studied from different perspectives, but its engagement with the theme of internal migration has remained unexplored. This paper seeks to address this gap in scholarship by portraying the migration of the protagonist Balram Halwai from the proverbial “darkness” of the villages to the “light” of the cities. It empathetically documents his resistance and resilience against caste and class discrimination in the village and the city. Adiga’s novel interjects into the larger theme of literary representation of internal migration and depicts the push and pull factors that lead to urbanisation in India. This paper will raise the question and attempt to answer whether rural to urban migration can overcome the socioeconomic hierarchies existing in the rural spaces or is an exercise in futility.

Keywords: Rural to urban internal migration, caste and class migration, rooster coop, Nietzsche’s *ubermensch*.

Introduction

Aravind Adiga’s debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), which won the Man Booker Prize in 2008, foregrounds the otherwise neglected, vulnerable lives of internal migrants by portraying the life story of his protagonist Balram Halwai who migrates from the village to the city as a landless labourer. Before Adiga, the literary narratives on migration experiences had been dominated either by international migrants or by social scientists who have studied the phenomenon from the perspective of sociology, anthropology and economics. Adiga brings the focus back on internal migration through a conventional literary work, highlighting the

Mohua Dutta (mdutta@iitk.ac.in.) is currently pursuing her PhD in English Literature from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.

superimposing issue of caste and class and how urban migration is primarily triggered due to economic inequality in sharing of resources between the landowners and the landless labourers in the villages. By focussing on a character like Balram, Adiga humanises the portrayal and offers an individualistic focus on an issue that plagues all the villages and cities in India.

This paper has been divided into three major sections. The first section delves into Adiga's depiction of a dystopian village with limited access to essential infrastructural developments in education, healthcare and agrarian and non-agrarian employment opportunities necessitating the economic migration of the lower-class labourers to the cities. The second section examines how contrary to popular beliefs, urban spaces do not emancipate the oppressed (caste or class) migrants, how caste-free metropolises are a myth, and how an individual remains trapped within the same networks of caste discrimination and economic destitution despite their migration to the cities. The novel explores two equally distressing possibilities that embody all the opportunities that migration from the village to the city offers — either to remain caught within the 'rooster coop' as Balram was despite his migration from Laxmangarh to Gurgaon or to evolve into an anonymous, atomised, and morally compromised individual as his eventual migration to Bangalore portrays. The third section explores whether subaltern migrants like Balram require radical actions like murder and thieving to break the vicious cycle of the rooster coop. It, thus, questions whether this novel provides the possibility of liberation from the rooster coop or undercuts that possibility by giving a morally problematic solution. To conclude, this paper will question Balram's motives in confessing his crimes to a foreign dignitary like the Chinese Premier and discuss how this novel ends in aporia regarding rural to urban migration.

Representation of Rural Life in *The White Tiger*

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* presents the story of the protagonist Balram Halwai's migration, in his own words, from the 'Darkness' of the village (Laxmangarh in Bihar) to the 'Light' of the cities (Gurgaon and Bangalore) in search of better economic opportunities. Written in the genre of an epistolary novel, the narrative is composed of seven confessional letters Balram writes over the course of one week to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, who is scheduled to visit Bangalore to learn the secret of India's burgeoning culture of entrepreneurship. Balram cautions Mr Jiabao that he will be shown a whitewashed India as the Prime Minister will offer platitudes about how moral and saintly India is, while the truth about Bangalore's success, which only he can uncover, stems from unsavoury conditions under which entrepreneurship is born and nurtured in this country.

Balram begins his narration by exposing the sham of the Indian villages as a repository of traditional wisdom and feudal values of socialism and egalitarianism. Here, he refers to the discourse that originated in the works of orientalists like Sir Charles Metcalfe, Sir Henry Maine and O'Malley, who portrayed India as a land of mythical village republics, "self-

contained, inwardly turned communities consisting of cooperative communal agents” (Inden 1990, 132), which was then perpetuated by nationalists like Rabindranath Tagore in ‘Swadeshi Samaj’ (1904) and M.K. Gandhi in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), eventually becoming a dogma. Balram disputes this discourse by portraying his native village Laxmangarh in Bihar, which is dominated by four feudal landlords who between themselves had divided the natural and man-made resources and would charge the villagers exorbitant fees to use them (Adiga [2008] 2017, 24-25), thus breaking the mirage of the village as a space of “anti-consumerism” (Nandy 2001, 13). He contests that lack of proper employment, agrarian or otherwise, makes the village a site of ‘darkness’ for the landless labourers and forces them to seek jobs in the cities. Unable to pay the landlords, Balram narrates how he has seen the men of his village leave their families behind each year to go to Delhi, Calcutta and Dhanbad to eke out a living. Since they had left their families behind and did not have the resources to make the migration permanent, they would return to their villages before the monsoons, “leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets” (Adiga [2008] 2017, 26). He also notices a similar pattern of migration when he was himself migrating to Delhi as a driver and remarks that the roads were choked with buses and jeeps, “bursting with passengers who packed the insides, and hung out the doors, and even got on the roofs. They were all headed from the Darkness to Delhi. You’d think the whole world was migrating” (ibid., 111). Thus, without aestheticising or romanticising the correlation between economic limitation and urban migration, Balram dives straight into the inner contradictions and tensions in the villages, which trigger this escalation in the economic migration from the villages to the cities. He also highlights that much of the labour migration in India is circular in nature because of the limited social and economic opportunities at host localities, which forces the migrants to return to their home territories during the lean periods, thus trapping them within the same impoverished circumstances both at the host locations and home territories.

Apart from the failure of the rural economy to provide a livelihood to the landless and unskilled labourers, Balram also highlights the apathetic state of the educational institutions in the rural areas. He begins his series of letters by calling himself “half-baked” (ibid., 10) because despite showing academic brilliance, he and his brother Kishan had been pulled out of school and made to work at a tea stall. Even when they used to go to school, their inebriated school teacher would not teach anything in class. Additionally, the teacher used to steal the government money allocated for students’ lunches and uniforms, justifying his behaviour with the excuse that he had not been paid for six months (ibid., 33). When Balram speaks of his and his brother’s penurious childhood, he speaks on behalf of all the poor children in the country who are routinely denied education and made to work in fields or small shops and factories to support their families (ibid, 10-11). Considering that the majority of the children still live in the villages and small towns of India, this situation becomes doubly problematic because lack of education or marketable skills puts the rural children at a distinct disadvantage in the labour market.

Through his narrative, Balram also unveils the endemic corruption in the public healthcare sector in rural communities. He recounts his father's miserable death from tuberculosis, a disease that only afflicts the poor (Jeffries 2008). Balram observes that although there is no hospital in his village, "there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections" (Adiga [2008] 2017, 47). The government hospital where Balram and Kishan take their father to was in another town, housed in a dilapidated building where countless ill and injured people were sitting on the floor, waiting for a doctor to arrive. The doctors had paid off the corrupt politicians to secure the government jobs and consequently ignored the government hospital while they minted money at the private hospitals (ibid., 49-50). Balram's father died without ever being attended by any doctor. Here the problem of corruption is twofold — because the doctors had spent an enormous amount of money on their education and bribed the politicians to secure a government job, and, in turn, they had become corrupt to recoup the money spent. Secondly, as seen in the case of the school teacher and assumed in the case of the absent doctors, they were not paid their salaries on time, forcing them to resort to corruption, presumably because the private sector pays well and on time.

Balram calls the villages 'Darkness', "a place where necessities such as clean water, a home, money and health are routinely snatched away by the wealthy, who live up there in the Light" (Adiga quoted in Rushby 2008). Every election, they were promised electricity, running water and reforms to fight malnutrition in the children, but after the elections, all they got were defunct electricity poles, broken water taps and deaths of malnourished children suffering from various deficiencies (Adiga [2008] 2017, 19-20). Balram argues that nothing improves in the country, especially in the rural areas, due to rampant corruption and the mockery of democracy that the political parties make in every election. Balram calls it a "disease" that "makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in... like eunuchs discussing the *Kama Sutra*, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh" (ibid., 98). Widespread illiteracy, criminalisation of politics, communal politics, evading code of conduct through money laundering and muscle power, the politicisation of the police and booth capturing are common phenomena witnessed in every election in the 'Darkness' (ibid., 96-102). Balram could do nothing but describe it as "*a fucking joke*" (ibid., 102) because even though he had been a fugitive for more than a decade, someone had still been casting a vote in his name in every general, state and local election. He says, "I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth" (ibid., 102). Khor argues that when elections are engineered in the rural areas by the corrupt parties to remain in power, the "poor Indians are excluded from access to real political power, civil society organizing, and even legal justice" (Khor 2012, 47). Thus, through Balram's story, Adiga exposes the failure of the government infrastructure and the institutions, the pervasiveness of government corruption, and the faults of a class structure that restricts social mobility in the villages, creating multiple 'push factors' which necessitate economic migration of the lower class labourers to the cities.

Balram also tries to weave in the complexity of the caste system to justify his lower-class status. Traditionally he belonged to the caste of 'Halwais', sweet-makers by profession and, therefore, both Balram and Kishan were able to find jobs in the tea shops in Laxmangarh (Adiga [2008] 2017, 63). However, when Balram wanted to be a driver, he could not find anyone willing to teach him (ibid., 56). He ruminates on his destiny to be a "human spider" all his life, crawling on the ground beneath the chairs and tables and doing menial cleaning jobs at tea shops (ibid., 51). Anybody who heard his family name could precisely place him in the social hierarchy, and so he equals caste with destiny and rhetorically questions why he was cheated out of his destiny: "My father's father must have been a real Halwai, a sweet-maker, but when he inherited the shop, a member of some other caste must have stolen it from him with the help of the police. My father had not had the belly to fight back. That's why he had fallen all the way to the mud, to the level of a rickshaw-puller. That's why I was cheated of my destiny to be fat, and creamy-skinned, and smiling" (ibid., 63-64). He argues that in the old days of a rigid caste system, social identities were fixed, and everyone was "in his place, everyone happy" (ibid., 63). According to Balram, the end of the British rule brought chaos to the organised "zoo" and turned it into a "jungle", and a multitude of castes was split into two primary groups: the rich and the poor, "Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies" (ibid., 64), with jungle law replacing the zoo law, "eat — or get eaten up" (ibid., 64). However, because the caste identity affiliations were no longer meaningful in the "jungle", it could easily be traversed by violence, like he was denied his destiny to be a sweet-maker.

Balram's ruminations on the caste system to justify his lower-class status are ironic. He is privileged to be ignorant about the sufferings of others under the caste system. Despite Balram trying to debunk the myth of the ideal Indian village throughout his narrative, he also falls into the same trap Ashis Nandy calls "village of the imagination" (Nandy 2001, 13) by assuming that everyone was happy in the bygone days because they had their caste occupations marked out for them since birth. Raymond Williams cautions against believing in such generalisations, calling these "golden age epochs ... against which contemporary change can be measured" as faulty perceptions, one that has no historical reference (Williams 1973, 35). Paradoxically, Balram had three occasions where he could have realised his so-called destiny to be a sweet-maker, but in each of the circumstances, he chose to be someone else — a driver at first and then the owner of a taxi service and finally a real estate proprietor — only because it paid better and was a more respectable vocation. Thus, his desire for social and economic mobility far outweighed his need to confine himself to his village and his caste occupation.

Critique of Urban Life in *The White Tiger*

To theorise that migration from rural to urban spaces emancipates the oppressed (caste or class) village folks would be a naïve assumption. In an interview, Adiga claims that although

the advent of industrialisation, technological modernisation, and globalisation has made the Indian society more fluid regarding economic and social mobility, the traditional family unit residing in the rural areas is still the reason caste and class exploitation is perpetrated in both rural and urban setups, a phenomenon he calls “the rooster coop” (quoted in Sawhney 2008).

Balram explains the “rooster coop” as a strategy of social control which ensures that the poor never rise against their enslavers, primarily through the exercise of physical coercion and threats of violence against the family members. In this metaphor, roosters in a coop watch the other roosters get slaughtered but are unwilling to rebel and break out of the coop. Here, the butcher represents the rich while the roosters represent the poor. Balram calls the roosters guarding the coop a society of people complicit in their servitude, aware they are waiting for the axe yet unwilling to escape (Suneetha 2012, 173). He argues, “here in India, we have no dictatorship. No secret police. That’s because we have the coop” (Adiga [2008] 2017, 175). This method of social control is so successful, Balram continues, that the poor will refuse the very keys to their freedom in favour of perpetual servitude. He says, “Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent — as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way — to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key to his emancipation in a man’s hands, and he will throw it back at you with a curse” (ibid., 175-76). Membership in the “99.9 percent” is a mark not of social power through mass solidarity but of perpetual enslavement and ideological control through the concentration of wealth (Shingavi 2014, 11). Balram’s narrative points out that the trustworthiness of the servants and their acceptance of the caste system as preordained and predestined has always been, and still is, the backbone of the Indian economy because servants rarely aspire to replace their masters, thus making the system stable (Adiga [2008] 2017, 175). As a matter of fact, exploitative recruitments based on caste and kinship networks were the reason Balram gained his first chauffeuring job at the Stock’s house at Dhanbad, facilitating his migration from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad.

Through this novel, Adiga demonstrates how “corruption, lack of health services for the poor and the presumption that the family is always the repository of good” have been holding India back from realising its true potential (quoted in Jeffries 2008). He, therefore, posits a hypothetical situation in his novel where one man is able to break out of the family-induced servitude and makes ‘the white tiger’ within Balram “spill a little blood” on his way to attain that freedom. Adiga says,

“For Indian readers, one of the most upsetting parts of that break-out is that Halwai casts off his family. ... In India, there has never been a strong central political control, which is probably why the family is still so important. ... But the family ties get broken or at least stretched when anonymous, un-

Indian cities like Bangalore draw people from the villages. These are the new tensions of India, but Indians don't think about them" (quoted in Jeffries 2008).

The mention of Bangalore as an "un-Indian city" echoes Sujit Banerji's sociological study where he investigates why the growing urban areas, like Bangalore, are not considered part of the "real" India (Banerji 1969, 431). Balram is eventually able to break out of the rooster coop when he migrates to Bangalore to become that anonymous and atomised urban migrant as predicted by Nandy because he is unlike any other internal migrant witnessed in literature, and that makes him an exception to the old migrant class. P. Suneetha asserts that before Adiga, other Indian English novelists like Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao had depicted the "authentic" village life and its inhabitants differently, portraying them as people whose "lives derived meaning from their identification with temples, rivers, hills, mounds and markets, a peasant sensibility expressed in a style unique to Indian fiction" (Suneetha 2012, 163). Adiga challenges the authenticity of such a portrayal through Balram's homecoming. The first time Balram drives back from Dhanbad to Laxmangarh for an excursion desired by Ashok, all he sees in his village are the broken roads, undisciplined drivers, the generic marketplace selling generic household items and small children enamoured by big cars (Adiga [2008] 2017, 81). Instead of getting poignant about the time he had spent with his father on the Black Fort, he repeatedly spits at it, casting off any relations he had with that place. Unlike Ashok, who was sent away to study abroad in his childhood, Balram was born and brought up in this village, yet he sees it with an unexpected impassiveness.

The excursion from Dhanbad to Laxmangarh marks the beginning of Balram's severance from his rooster coop. Born to a rickshaw-puller father and a sickly mother who soon passes away, Balram's childhood was scarred by the indifference shown by his family members towards him and his parents, and as soon as his father passes away, he cuts the proverbial umbilical cord with his family (ibid., 13-14). He imagines himself to be the Devil, who one day decides not to give in to his servitude to God and rebels against Him by cutting off all ties with his family (ibid., 86-87). He says, "... *the Indian family*, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop. ... only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed — hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters — can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being but a freak, a pervert of nature. It would, in fact, take a *White Tiger*" (ibid., 176-77). Balram understood that his family's relationship with him was purely monetary, and this is highlighted thrice in the text — firstly, with no sustainable agrarian income of their own, Balram realises how much his family depends upon the remittances sent by him (ibid., 84). Secondly, his grandmother's repeated requests to him to get married is also geared towards two ends: dowry and further entrapment in the rooster coop. However, Balram refuses to send money home or get married because he knows that emotional attachments with his family would only tie him down. He reasons that the desire to be a servant was inbred within him so profoundly that he would have passed it on to his children (ibid., 193). Thirdly, instead of trying to save him, his grandmother strikes a deal with the Stork and even

agrees to be a witness when they try to pin Pinky's drunken hit-and-run case onto him (ibid., 168). Balram gets enraged when he realises that his family only cares about money, so he cuts himself off from them and, by extension, the vicious cycle of birth-poverty-death that the rooster coop protects. His inherent mistrust of the family structure allows him to break out of the moral foundation imposed by the rooster coop, which the other migrants cannot.

Balram feels revolted by the system of servitude and wants to break away from it because it takes away the dignity of human beings. Instead of employment being a contractual exchange of labour with remittances, servitude requires the servant's compliance at all times, more so if they belong to the lower caste/class. For instance, although Balram was trained for his occupation, he had to appease his masters with affability and suitable lowliness of his caste to gain employment (ibid., 64). He also had to pretend to be an abject subject who could not take any salary from them in return for services rendered because the Stork was a landowner and had a right over the labours of everyone in his village. Bridget Anderson argues that when domestic employment is construed as a form of kinship and family obligation, it "weakens the worker's negotiating position in terms of wages and conditions — any attempt to improve these are seen as an insult to the 'family' and evidence of the worker's moneygrubbing attitude" (quoted in Tickell 2015, 160). In exchange for food and housing, Balram was expected to cook, clean, bathe their two dogs, do household chores, and massage the Stork's feet even though he was only hired and paid for a driver's position. As Balram explains, "in India — or, at least, in the Darkness — the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants" (Adiga [2008] 2017, 68). The same routine was also followed in their Gurgaon home, where Balram was expected to cook, clean and perform other household chores. On Pinky's birthday, Ashok gets Balram to serve them in Air India Maharaja's costume, transforming him into a human version of one of India's oldest commercial brands of deferential service (Tickell 2015, 160). Balram tells the Chinese Premier that he does not envy the rich in America or other European countries because "they have no servants there. They cannot even *begin* to understand what a good life is" (Adiga [2008] 2017, 176). Physical violence was also an accepted part of the deal, as the Stork would often hit Balram instead of instructing him (ibid., 71). When asked by Ashok if it was required to beat the servants, Stork replied: "They expect it from us, Ashok. Remember that — they respect us for it" (ibid., 72). Unfortunately, the Stork was not far from the truth. Two incidents in the text prove that the master and the servant were made from the same mould. In the first instance, when Ashok hits Pinky for the first time, Balram remarks, "About time you took charge, O Lamb-that-was-born-from-the-loins-of-a-landlord" (ibid., 155). In the second instance, when Ashok realises that Pinky has left him and Balram had driven her to the airport, he tries to strangle Balram and push him off the parapet of his 13th-floor apartment, but Balram simply remarks, "the landlord inside him wasn't dead, after all" (ibid., 182).

For most of his life, Balram was held back by his socially conditioned servile mentality and believed that if he served his master loyally, his master would take care of him and protect

him in return (Khor 2012, 44). He had made himself indispensable to them, not just by following their commands but also by never leaking any gossip about the family, protecting their reputation even at the cost of being ridiculed. The remark made by the other drivers in Gurgaon that he was “loyal to the last. They don’t make servants like you anymore”, in reality, points toward his servile mentality (Adiga [2008] 2017, 183). It takes Ashok visiting his living quarters in Dhanbad to make him realise the miserable condition he used to live in, and only when he starts looking through the eyes of the rich that he recognises how enslaved to poverty his mind and body were (ibid., 78-79). He compares himself to Hanuman, carrying his master and mistress Ram and Sita (ibid., 46), and calls Hanuman the “favourite god in the Darkness” because “he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love and devotion” (ibid., 19) and notes with dismay that with such “kinds of gods ... foisted on us, ... understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India” (ibid., 19). He exposes how religion protects the caste and class system and solidifies the rooster coop.

However, in return for his servility, Balram soon learns that his masters, including Ashok, only care for themselves. After being called a “part of the family” (ibid., 165), Balram is asked to take the blame for Pinky’s drunken hit-and-run, and he begins to understand how the master class has fattened itself at the expense of the servant class (Khor 2012, 44). He explains that “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. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul and arse” (ibid., 169). Instead of protesting, the driver’s family also enjoys the compensation given by the employers and brags to everyone how loyal and steadfast the driver is, which further helps other members get jobs. Even the police and the judiciary are corrupt and are in on the scam, paid handsomely to ignore the discrepancies in the cases. Again, the driver has no say in this because he fears for his family, just like Balram did (ibid., 177). Nandy articulates that it is in the “political psychology of the city” to offer “anonymity and atomisation” to all its migrant workers (Nandy 2001, 12). Nandy saw urban migration as “a cultivated forgetfulness” (ibid., viii), “a radical and legitimate rejection of the village as that part of one’s self which had outlived its utility” (ibid., 12). Raymond Williams also says that the city “vends a dream of total freedom” (Williams 1973, viii) from the “village as a self” (ibid., 13). However, my contestation is that caste free metropolises are a myth because of the family structure which still resides in the villages and keeps migrants enslaved to the rooster coop. Balram also contests this claim because even while living in the city, the people know his caste, ancestral profession and native village once he tells his family name. This is precisely the reason he adopts the upper-caste name of Ashok Sharma in Bangalore, both as a nod to his previous employer and to his previous caste identity, which he wanted to shed.

Apart from the rooster coop, migrants like Balram also face several other infrastructural difficulties in the cities. When he speaks about Delhi, he mentions the pollution and the

filthiness of the city space (Adiga [2008] 2017, 133-34), the constant construction work everywhere (ibid., 157) and the sight of thousands of homeless people who have migrated from the Darkness in anticipation of a good life but were now living on the streets or under the flyovers and bridges, in conditions worse than what they had lived in the Darkness (ibid., 119-120). Those constructing the rich's houses, malls and office spaces lived in slums beside the sewage and sewer lines (ibid., 260). Balram acknowledges two cities living simultaneously within Delhi, "inside and outside the dark egg" of an air-conditioned car (ibid., 138). The two Indias that Balram talks about consist of "one third-two thirds" divide, i.e. one-third of the rich controlling the two-thirds of the poor (Khor 2012, 46). He compares this divide with his dual life — although he resided in the "*modernest* suburb of Delhi" (Adiga [2008] 2017, 122) inside one of the poshest apartment buildings, his life was more miserable than the homeless vagabonds of the city. This is because of the inhumanely designed servants' dormitories in the basement of the buildings where the masters live. With cramped spaces and shared bedrooms and bathrooms, the urban servants, who are mostly migrant workers from the hinterlands, find it challenging to make a home of their own (ibid., 130-132). There are no provisions for them to bring in their families, nor are they allowed to go home frequently. They are expected to be available at all times at the beck and call of their masters, till the end of their lives or until they are dismissed due to old age or disability (ibid., 130). Moreover, the servants and the drivers are invisible figures, and the rich are mostly oblivious to their hardships. Balram voices the dreary occupation of the waiting drivers when he says that sleeplessness, boredom, incessant mosquito bites and discomfort due to extreme heat or cold temperatures are just some of the daily problems faced by them (ibid., 124), and having nothing to do for hours makes "drunks of so many honest drivers" (ibid., 149).

In the absence of personal space, the servants' quarters and the parking lots of the malls or offices (where the drivers wait) replicate the functionality of a slum for the drivers/servants. Ashis Nandy describes a slum in the city as something caught between "trying to re-invoke a remembered village under different guises" (Nandy 2001, 20) and accepting it "as a new home, from within the boundaries of which one has the privilege of surveying the ruins of one's other abandoned homes" (ibid., 25). The roadside slums, as well as the servants' quarters, then become a ghetto for the poor migrants belonging to one particular caste or region or language group, dreaming of an imaginary return to their villages (ibid., 20) whereas also acknowledging the fact that there is nothing left to return to in the village (ibid., 72-73). Nandy calls this dilemma "an urban psycho-geography" (ibid., 74) in which the city and the slum are seen as "the location of homelessness forever trying to reconcile non-communitarian individualism and associated forms of freedom with communitarian responsibilities" (ibid., 25). Nandy further argues that "the city's promise of freedom also camouflages a certain heartless, inhuman impersonality, casual cynicism, and persistent quiet violence" (ibid., 72-73), something we notice in the drivers' interactions with each other. The servants' quarters and the parking lots of malls or offices are the only places where the drivers are free to be themselves and are not under the constant scrutinising gaze of their masters. They spend

their time reading trashy magazines, gossiping about their masters and mocking/ridiculing any new driver, which makes Balram compare them to a dog who is loyal to its master but vicious towards other dogs, saying, “we attack anyone who’s familiar” (Adiga [2008] 2017, 130). Thus, he concludes that it was the rooster coop mentality that was at work here — servants pulling down other servants by keeping them “from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs ... the coop is guarded from the inside” (ibid., 194). He identifies two kinds of underdevelopment that leads to inequality: the rich under-develop the poor, and the poor under-develop each other (Khor 2012, 46), and at the heart of this understanding is the rooster coop.

Balram detaching himself from the other drivers, both physically and socially, while waiting at the offices and malls, points towards his attempts to separate himself from anything that even remotely resembles his village community. Instead of idling away his time, he begins to improve himself by changing his appearance and mannerisms, fashioning himself after Ashok, and expanding his knowledge by reading English magazines. Additionally, instead of sharing quarters with the other drivers of his caste and class, Balram chooses social alienation. The room in which Balram chooses to stay is infested with cockroaches and mosquitoes, with unfinished flooring and cheap plaster peeling off the walls, but he values his privacy over social interactions with his community members (Adiga [2008] 2017, 131). In fact, in comparison to his living arrangements, the car he drives is more spacious and cleaner. These characteristics of Balram differentiate him from the other migrant drivers who would remain caught in the rooster coop their entire lives.

Balram’s attempts to copy Ashok hint at his aspirations for upward social mobility, which ends in him taking Ashok’s name in Bangalore, where he imagines himself metamorphosed into his previous master. While living in Gurgaon, he begins to mimic Ashok in his choice of clothes and shoes (ibid., 148-49) and of women (ibid., 233-235). He stops chewing *paan* and starts brushing his teeth with whitening toothpaste, and he also ceases to scratch his groin (ibid., 150). The primary impetus for these self-improvements was Pinky’s criticism: “You’re so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, look at your clothes! There’s red *paan* all over your teeth, and there are red spots on your shirt. It’s disgusting!” (ibid., 146). Because a member of the elite class is disgusted by these aspects, Balram identifies them as disgusting too (Khor 2012, 52). He wonders, “Why had my father never told me not to scratch my groin? Why had my father never taught me to brush my teeth in milky foam? Why had he raised me to live like an animal? Why do all the poor live amid such filth, such ugliness?” (Adiga [2008] 2017, 151). Such self-critique and self-questioning bring him farther away from his class, this time not just physically or socially, but mentally and emotionally as well.

However, Pinky’s hit-and-run episode fundamentally changes his equation with his employers, especially after he sees how unconcerned they appear about condemning an innocent to prison, and so he declares a class war on them (ibid., 179-180). Pinky’s remorse over her

drunken accident and her desire to compensate the victim's family (ibid., 180) makes Balram comment, "who would have thought, Mr Jiabao, that of this whole family, this lady with the short skirts would be the one with a conscience?" (ibid., 180). Still, he deems Pinky's parting gift of 4700 rupees as curiously inadequate because he imagines her withdrawing 10,000 rupees or at least 5000 rupees to give him, and then changing her mind at the last moment (ibid., 206). Similarly, when Ashok promises to take care of his wedding, and then instead of a 1000 rupee note, hands him just a 100 rupee note (ibid., 258), he decides that all the rich people owe him much more and that he needs to rebalance the scales by turning the tables on his masters (Khor 2012, 44). Pinky's departure, who is ironically dubbed as the 'moral centre' of the novel despite her involvement in the accident, fills Balram with a sense of painful betrayal and a primordial rage that allows him to break through his social programming of subservience and catalyses his transformation into the White Tiger. He begins to syphon petrol and inflate the cost of repairs to the car, sells empty whisky bottles to the bootleggers and turns Ashok's car into a freelance taxi (Adiga [2008] 2017, 230). The more he steals from Ashok, the more he realises that Ashok and his creed have always stolen from the poor like him. In his own words, he was growing a belly at last and becoming his own master (ibid., 231-32). Sankaran Krishna argues that the West is more prosperous than the non-West because it possesses the attributes critical for developmental success, especially the ability to act in "rational, self-interested ways to better one's own life", and Balram imbibes these attributes in Delhi (quoted in Khor 2012, 49-52).

Balram's determination to not let his lower class/caste status limit him fills him with a sense of righteous indignation that the subalterns like himself have lived to serve and enrich others (Khor 2012, 50). Balram's biggest coup was to slit Ashok's throat with a broken liquor bottle and steal 7,00,000 rupees meant to bribe the newly elected political party for further tax breaks. Along with Dharam (his nephew), Balram absconds to Bangalore, changes his name to Ashok Sharma and uses the stolen money as capital to start his taxi service for the outsourcing companies. He bribes the local police inspector to revoke the license of competing taxi services so that the companies hire his services and gradually builds his transport and real estate business.

The last stage of Balram's migration from Delhi to Bangalore also marks his ideological movement. When Balram becomes a capitalist himself, he replaces the exploitative feudal master-servant relationship with the contractual relationship between an employer and his employees based on mutual respect, trust and honouring of the contract by both the parties (Adiga [2008] 2017, 302). He perceives himself to be ethically and morally superior to his village landlords. As an entrepreneur in Bangalore, Balram finds he has the option, even the duty to be good, something he claims is impossible as a subaltern in Laxmangarh: "It's just that here if a man wants to be good, he *can* be good. In Laxmangarh, he doesn't even have this choice. That is the difference between this India and that India: the *choice*" (ibid., 306). The most significant instance of Balram's improved moral standpoint is when one of his taxi

drivers accidentally kills a boy on a bicycle. Although he bribes the police into blaming the victim and offers his parents monetary compensation, he never forces his driver to take the blame for him (ibid., 306-313). As his means of atonement and benevolence, Balram's method of corruption is monetary (Khor 2012, 57). Instead, he accepts the responsibility and offers himself for penance and atonement, and explains his actions in almost emotional terms: "But I had to do something different; don't you see? I can't live the way the Wild Boar and the Buffalo and the Raven lived, and probably *still* live, back in Laxmangarh. I am in the Light now" (Adiga [2008] 2017, 313).

The (Im)Possibility of Breaking the Rooster Coop

Balram's memoir completes the trajectory of his migration from the 'darkness' of the villages where the necessities of life like education, healthcare and employment were denied to him, to the 'light' of the cities where he propelled himself out of his subalternism to gain socioeconomic and political agency. However, two pertinent questions are raised here: why does Balram choose this morally questionable and legally criminal trajectory and is this the only viable option for him to break the rooster coop? Evidently, Adiga thinks that the quicksand of caste and class cannot be traversed only through rural to urban migration but requires a drastic action like Balram's. He says: "There are lots of self-made millionaires in India now, certainly, lots of successful entrepreneurs. However, remember that over a billion people live here, and for the majority of them, who are denied decent health care, education or employment, getting to the top would take doing something like what Balram has done" (quoted in Jeffries 2008). In another interview, Adiga repeats:

"If you don't have English, an education, or healthcare, then how are you going to do something to transform your life? ... The only transformation possible is a crime for someone like Balram, otherwise, he's going to be surrounded by fantasies, dreams and not make it out. Often life is so tough you just have to be brutal. ... You need two things — a divide and a conscious ideology of resentment. We don't have resentment in India. The poor just assume that the rich are a fact of life. ... But I think we're seeing what I believe is a class-based resentment for the first time" (qtd in Sawhney 2008).

Undoubtedly, Adiga believes that he could not have found a better solution for Balram's predicament since Balram's unrepentant declaration at the end of the novel tends to lend moral weight to both the author and his protagonist: "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 [2008] 2017, 321). Adiga's rationalisation is sustained by Singhavi, who argues that Balram requires two symbolically dense murders to become an entrepreneur: "the murder of the employer (and therefore murder of the self-as-labourer) and the murder of the family (and

thus murder of the caste-bound self)” (Shingavi 2014, 9). Thus, Balram needs to use the implicit threat against his family to steer his rage against his employer, and at the same time, he also needs his family to die so that he can escape the rooster coop of caste and class. Nevertheless, despite Balram’s pretensions to be nonchalant about sacrificing his family in the process of elevating his social position, his obsession with extravagant chandeliers become the physical manifestations of his guilt: “I should talk a little more about this chandelier. Why not? I’ve got no family anymore. All I’ve got is chandeliers” (Adiga [2008] 2017, 117).

Balram finds his literary predecessor in Rodion Raskolnikov of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866), who epitomises Nietzschean *ubermensch*. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), predicts the rise of a man he calls *ubermensch* (translated as “super-man” or “over-man”) who will break the shackles of the traditional Christian “herd morality” and will construct his moral system, hence acting as a model for those who follow. Dostoevsky criticises this concept through his protagonist Raskolnikov who believes that he could liberate himself from poverty and perform great deeds if only he could acquire money and that certain crimes (even murder) are justifiable if they are committed to remove obstacles in achieving the goals of ‘extraordinary’ men like himself. Similarly, Balram also accepts that corruption has been infused into the fabric of society, that the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor can never be hedged, and that this great divide is exacerbated through the notion of caste, which further cripples those hailing from impoverished backgrounds. But he decides to utilise these impediments to create a class-based resentment that allows him to construct his system of morals and rationalise his choices because it helps him climb the social ladder. Thus, he claims that his civil war against caste and class disparities makes him the future of India, “I am tomorrow” (Adiga [2008] 2017, 6), the servant who breaks free to become the master who accepts some moral accountability.

This text builds up the argument that rural to urban migration indeed presents a possibility of liberation from the rooster coop. Balram could not have been able to break the rooster coop even after murdering and thieving if he had stayed in his village because, as we have seen earlier, his whole being was restricted to his racial affiliation. Therefore, Balram needed to migrate to a metropolitan city like Bangalore to shed his previous caste and class identity and begin anew. Cities afford anonymity and atomisation to migrants like him, something not possible in any village or small town, however distant from his own. On the other hand, the trajectory adopted by Balram to break free from the rooster coop is so morally problematic that it makes one question its pragmatism or replicability by others.

Moreover, after shattering the rooster coop, Balram finds himself in a moral and social vacuum, boycotted by his society. He becomes atomised to the point of absolute isolation. Desperation arising from such isolation makes him boast about his possessions because he lacks respectability in the community. Throughout the narrative, he seems to be hiding behind the shadows of physical darkness in his office since he has essentially bought his freedom

through bribery and corruption. Even Raskolnikov is shown racked with disorientation, paranoia and disgust as he struggles with the guilt and horror of his actions. Eventually, he finds his redemption in Sonya's love and repents of his actions through his life sentence in the Siberian jail. However, Balram neither feels any shame nor finds any relationship to redeem him. He does not even repent upon the death of the young cyclist killed in a road accident by one of his drivers. Although he offers monetary compensation to the boy's family, in actuality, they receive no justice or retribution for the death of their son. Thus through his actions, Balram dehumanises familial relationships, treating them as collateral damages in his quest for personal freedom and affluence. Hence, although he claims to have attained enlightenment like Buddha when he begins to accept moral accountability and does not oppress others, in reality, he becomes what he hated the most — an alternate version of the feudal landlords in his village. Consequently, one needs to question if the text indeed points towards the possibility of breaking the rooster coop or if it undercuts that possibility by providing such an unrealistic solution.

Conclusion

To conclude, I think this novel ends in aporia because Balram is not able to break the existing social and economic hierarchies even after he migrates from the village to the city, but is reduced to imagining a substitute society where he opens a school to train 'white tigers' like him who would operate outside of moral, social and legal obligations (ibid., 319). He promises to teach his students ways to escape their socioeconomic impoverishment, but it comes at the cost of their moral deprivation and humanity. Since he shows no remorse himself and does not get punished for his crimes, he wishes to teach the next generation that something as heinous as murder (directly or indirectly) is also justified if it serves its purpose. Fundamentally, these fantasies are of a desperate and isolated man who envisions creating a different social order where he would not be judged for his actions or made to feel guilty about them. Balram's yearning for the existence of such a community emerges from his lack of caste and class membership and a desire to reintegrate himself within some social structure. Such delusions of Balram reaffirm the impossibility of undermining the rooster coop.

Moreover, his need to confess his crime to a foreign dignitary like the Chinese Premier also hints at his need to form a community. Confessions are typically made to religious or moral exemplars, but a politician like the Chinese Premier hardly fits the bill. On the contrary, because Balram does not consider the Chinese Premier a moral standard, he feels comfortable confessing to him. Since he cannot find anybody from his community to connect to, he thinks that someone like the Chinese Premier will understand him, and he will not be judged by the same standards of morality or law as his peers. He compares himself with the Chinese Premier and says that every politician in this world, including Mr Jiabao, must have killed "someone or another on their way to the top" (ibid., 318). Again, he chooses the most exotic figure he could find and about whom he knows nothing but assumes the worst so that he could share his burden of guilt with him. Furthermore, typically confessions are geared

towards the absolution of one's sins so that the sinner could be reabsorbed into the community. But since Balram does not send those letters, it becomes a futile exercise, and the aporia continues in his case.

References

Adiga, Aravind. [2008] 2017. *The White Tiger*. Reprint, 20th Impression. India: Harper Collins.

Banerji, Sujit. 1969. "The Role of Metropolitan Planning in Indian Urbanization." *Ekistics* 28 (169): 430-434. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43614819>.

Fyodor Dostoyevsky. [1866] 1989. *Crime and Punishment*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company.

Goh, Robbie B. H. 2011. "Narrating 'Dark' India in *Londonstani* and *The White Tiger*: Sustaining Identity in the Diaspora." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46 (2): 327-344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989411404995>

Inden, Ronald B. 1990. "Village India, Living Essence of the Ancient." In *Imagining India*, Chapter 4. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Jeffries, Stuart. 2008. "Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, provokes roars of anger in India." *The Guardian*, October 16, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/16/booker-prize>

Khor, Lena. 2012. "Can the Subaltern Right Wrongs? Human Rights and Development in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *South Central Review* 29 (1/2): 41-67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41679388>

Nandy, Ashis. 2001. *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*. India: Oxford University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. [1954] 1961. "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." Collected in *The Portable Nietzsche*. Eighth reprint. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking Press.

Rushby, Kevin. 2008. "Review: *The White Tiger*." *The Guardian*, April 19, 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/19/featuresreviews.guardianreview19>

Sawhney, Hirsh. 2008 "India: A View from Below – Aravind Adiga with Hirsh Sawhney." *The Brooklyn Rail*, September. <https://brooklynrail.org/2008/09/express/india-a-view-from-below>

Shingavi, Snehal. 2014. "Capitalism, Caste, and Con-Games in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Postcolonial Text* 9 (3): 1-16.

Suneetha, P. 2012. "Double Vision in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 42 (2): 163–175.

Tickell, Alex. 2015. "Driving Pinky Madam (and murdering Mr Ashok): Social Justice and Domestic Service in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." In *Reworking Postcolonialism: Globalisation, Labour and Rights*, edited by P. Malreddy et al., 150-164. United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan.

Williams, Raymond. 1973. *The Country and the City*. New York: Oxford University Press.