

Cultural Materialism in Aravind Adiga's the White Tiger: Unveiling the Economics of Oppression

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* through the lens of cultural materialism, highlighting how the novel critiques the economic structures, social hierarchies, and material conditions of contemporary India. The analysis reveals how Adiga's portrayal of class struggle between the impoverished protagonist, Balram Halwai, and his wealthy employers exposes the capitalist exploitation and deep economic disparities inherent in Indian society. The novel illustrates the internalization of oppressive ideologies and the role of globalization in exacerbating cultural and economic inequalities. By portraying Balram's moral compromises in his pursuit of material success, Adiga critiques the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the ethical costs associated with achieving upward mobility. This cultural materialist perspective underscores the novel's engagement with themes of class, ideology, and globalization, challenging readers to reconsider the cultural and economic systems that perpetuate inequality and exploitation.

Keywords: Cultural Materialism, Class Struggle, Economic Inequality, Capitalist Exploitation, Ideological Hegemony, Globalization, Cultural Imperialism, Moral Compromise, Social Mobility, Contemporary Indian Fiction

Cultural materialism, a theoretical approach that examines the relationship between material conditions and cultural expressions, offers a valuable perspective for analyzing Indian English literature. This literary tradition, known for its diversity and richness, mirrors the complexities of India's socio-economic landscape. By viewing Indian English literature through the lens of cultural materialism, we can gain a deeper understanding of how economic, social, and environmental factors influence literary narratives and shape cultural identity in this dynamic context.

Historically, cultural materialism reveals the intricate links between economic structures and literary expression. The literature of colonial India, for example, reflects the economic exploitation and cultural changes brought about by British rule. Writers like Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand highlight the socio-economic inequalities of the era, providing insight into how material conditions influenced the themes and characterizations in their works.

The caste system, a deeply rooted social institution in India, frequently appears as a theme in Indian English literature. Cultural materialism allows us to examine how economic and social structures both sustain and challenge the caste hierarchy. Novels like Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and works by Dalit writers such as Bama offer a glimpse into the material realities of caste and their impact on the literary landscape.

Post-independence literature reflects the economic changes that have taken place in India. Cultural materialism enables the exploration of how industrialization, economic policies, and globalization are echoed in literary narratives. Authors such as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh engage with these economic shifts and their effects on cultural identity, providing a framework for analyzing the complexities of a transforming society.

Environmental concerns, increasingly prominent in contemporary literature, can also be examined through the lens of cultural materialism. Writers like Arundhati Roy and Vandana Shiva incorporate ecological issues rooted in economic practices. Cultural materialism helps to explore how environmental awareness is intertwined with cultural identity in Indian English literature.

Cultural materialism is closely linked to the work of American anthropologist Marvin Harris, who played a significant role in developing and popularizing this perspective. His influential writings, such as *The Rise of Anthropological*

Theory (1968) and *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches: The Riddles of Culture* (1974), have made a lasting impact on the field of anthropology.

Harris's approach to cultural materialism highlights the importance of material and economic factors in shaping cultural practices, beliefs, and social structures. His work has been instrumental in shaping discussions about how culture is influenced by the material conditions within a society.

At the heart of cultural materialism is the concept of material determinism, which asserts that the material conditions of a society, including its mode of production, technological developments, and environmental context, play a crucial role in shaping its cultural landscape. Cultural materialists argue that these factors are central to the formation of cultural practices and beliefs, serving as the foundation for their analyses.

A key aspect of cultural materialism is the distinction between infrastructure and superstructure. The infrastructure represents the material foundation of a society, including its economic and technological aspects, while the superstructure encompasses cultural elements like rituals, beliefs, and social institutions. The theory posits that changes in the infrastructure lead to corresponding shifts in the superstructure, demonstrating the interconnectedness of material conditions and cultural expressions.

Cultural materialism, a theoretical framework rooted in Marxist criticism, emphasizes the material conditions of society—economic structures, social relations, and power dynamics—as the foundation for understanding cultural practices and ideologies. It posits that cultural products like literature are not just reflections of societal values but are actively shaped by and contribute to the maintenance of existing social orders.

In Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, cultural materialism serves as a crucial lens for analyzing the socio-economic disparities and power relations that define contemporary India. The novel explores the life of Balram Halwai, a man who rises from the depths of poverty to become a successful entrepreneur, exposing the brutal realities of a class-based society.

A substantial body of scholarship focuses on the themes of economic inequality and class struggle in *The White Tiger*. Critics like Anindya Raychaudhuri (2011) argue that Adiga's novel vividly portrays the systemic exploitation and dehumanization inherent in India's capitalist society. Raychaudhuri suggests that Adiga's depiction of the "Darkness" and "Light" metaphorically represents the economic and cultural divide between the rural poor and the urban elite. This duality emphasizes the role of material conditions in shaping individuals' lives and underscores the novel's critique of the socio-economic structures that sustain inequality.

Further, critics such as Priyamvada Gopal (2010) discuss how *The White Tiger* aligns with cultural materialism by illustrating the ways in which the poor are conditioned to accept their subjugation. Gopal's analysis points out that Balram's eventual rebellion is not just against his immediate circumstances but against the larger ideological constructs that justify and perpetuate the exploitation of the underclass. This aligns with Raymond Williams' concept of "structures of feeling," where the prevailing economic and social conditions generate a collective cultural response, reflected in Balram's awakening and subsequent actions.

Scholars like Elizabeth Jackson (2010) have examined the role of ideology and hegemony in *The White Tiger*. Jackson argues that the novel's narrative structure reveals how dominant ideologies are internalized by the subaltern classes, leading to their complicity in their own oppression. Balram's initial acceptance of his role as a servant is indicative of Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, where the ruling class's worldview is adopted as the cultural norm. Cultural materialism, in this context, helps to elucidate how Adiga critiques these hegemonic practices by illustrating Balram's gradual realization of his entrapment and his subsequent rejection of these ideologies.

Adiga uses the symbolic rearview mirror to delve into this theme, reflecting everything in duplicate and acting as a medium for the confrontation between Ashok and Balram. This image hints at the possibility of crossing identity boundaries, facilitating movement from one realm to another. Other examples of dualities in the text emphasize the extent of Balram's transformation. For instance, the two car accidents (Pinky Madam's hit-and-run and the death of the boy on the bicycle) highlight Balram's significant journey from being a mere pawn to becoming a representative of the more privileged "Light."

The extended Indian family plays a crucial role in the traditional life of the Darkness, serving as the core social unit where all members are expected to prioritize its interests selflessly. While the impoverished may see this familial structure as a source of strength, Balram realizes that it is another mechanism that keeps the poor trapped within the "Rooster Coop." What initially appears to be a support system actually imposes constraints that can suffocate individual

ambition, a reality that Balram almost experiences. Moreover, since a servant's disobedience brings repercussions on their entire family, individuals in servitude are bound by their masters' whims, making social mobility nearly impossible. To break free and succeed as an entrepreneur in Bangalore, a symbol of the new India, Balram must make the painful decision to sacrifice his family. This conflict suggests that thriving in the modern world and seizing the opportunities of a New India may require abandoning traditional family ties in favor of a new focus on individualism.

The novel powerfully depicts the sharp contrast between the wealthy urban class and the impoverished rural population. Balram's journey from rural poverty to urban success serves as a metaphor for the broader socio-economic changes occurring in India.

While class disparities are central to the narrative, the underlying theme of the caste system is subtly interwoven throughout. As a member of a lower caste, Balram faces discrimination and limited opportunities, underscoring the caste system's impact on social interactions and economic mobility.

Balram's transition from a destitute villager to a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore underscores the deep economic inequalities defining contemporary India. The narrative starkly illustrates the capitalist exploitation inherent in the servant-master relationship, with Balram's labor enriching his masters while he remains impoverished. This dynamic reflects Marx's concept of surplus value, where the bourgeoisie—represented by Ashok—extract wealth from the proletariat, Balram, who is caught in poverty. Adiga critiques this system by showing how it dehumanizes the poor, reducing them to mere instruments for the wealthy's accumulation of capital.

Balram's rise challenges the entrenched class structures of Indian society, though his ascent is marred by moral compromises, including murder. This suggests that in a capitalist society, social mobility is often achieved at the cost of ethical integrity. The novel thus aligns with cultural materialist views that material conditions shape not only social relations but also moral and ethical norms.

Furthermore, the novel delves into how dominant ideologies perpetuate the status quo, keeping the lower classes subjugated. Balram's initial acceptance of his servile role reflects the internalization of the ruling class's ideology, illustrating how the poor are conditioned to believe in the moral superiority of the rich and the inevitability of their own poverty. This internalized oppression exemplifies Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, where the ruling class's values become the accepted cultural norm, even among the oppressed. As Balram's awareness of these ideologies grows, his decision to murder Ashok and escape his servitude represents a break from these hegemonic forces and a moment of class consciousness.

The backdrop of globalization in *The White Tiger* adds another layer of analysis. The novel critiques how global economic forces impact local cultures and exacerbate existing inequalities. Characters like Ashok, who adopt Western values and lifestyles, highlight the influence of Western culture on India's urban elite. This cultural shift signifies cultural imperialism, where global capitalist forces promote Western norms at the expense of local traditions. The novel also addresses cultural homogenization, showing how global capital's infiltration into India overshadows traditional values with Western consumerism, aligning with Frederic Jameson's critique of globalization as a force spreading capitalist ideology at the cost of local cultural identities.

Ultimately, *The White Tiger* unfolds as a narrative focused on morality, suggesting that it can be seen as either rigid or flexible. Balram ultimately leans toward the latter view. To justify the murder of Ashok and the risk he imposes on his family, Balram creates his own moral code. He rationalizes the money he steals from Ashok by arguing that servants are exploited by the wealthy, convincing himself of his exceptional status as "the white tiger" to validate his actions. Believing himself to be the only one who has awakened to the reality of the "Rooster Coop," Balram feels driven to change his life. In this sense, he embodies a version of Nietzsche's "Übermensch," transcending the moral and legal boundaries of society.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* provides a profound critique of contemporary Indian society through the lens of cultural materialism. By examining the economic structures, social hierarchies, and material conditions depicted in the novel, we gain insight into how capitalist exploitation and class disparity shape the lives of individuals. Adiga's portrayal of Balram Halwai's journey from poverty to wealth highlights the deep-seated inequalities and the moral compromises required to achieve social mobility in a capitalist system. The novel also critiques the impact of globalization, illustrating how it exacerbates existing inequalities and promotes cultural imperialism at the expense of local traditions. Through its exploration of these themes, *The White Tiger* challenges readers to reflect on the cultural and economic systems that perpetuate exploitation and inequality, urging a reconsideration of the values and structures that define contemporary society.

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