

**Narrating Dystopia: Dark Comedy as an Artistic Tool for Social Commentary in the
*White Tiger***

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Abstract

The White Tiger, a Man-Booker prize-winning novel by Aravind Adiga is a scathing critique of socio-economic disparities of contemporary India presented through dark comedy. Traditionally, though dystopian fiction portrays a grim picture in an imaginary futuristic world, *The White Tiger* depicts a dystopian world in the present day where systemic corruption, exploitation, and oppression of the poor, and moral degradation dictate the lives of marginalized sections of the society. The novel is a daring critique of rapidly developing India, which crushes the hopes of billions of poor people while elevating a select few elites. Using satire, irony, and absurdity Adiga narrates the protagonist Balram Halwai's journey from servitude to self-made entrepreneur laying bare the stark contrast between the dark India and India shining. Ramin Bahrani, with the adaptation of the novel into a film of the same name, takes the story to a new dimension in the new medium. Using dystopian literary theory and post-colonial and adaptation theory, the research paper examines the unjust and unfair socio-economic structure constructed in the novel and film using dark comedy as an artistic tool. The study will analyze how both art forms attempt to expose dominant power structures and satirize neo-colonial economic disparities leading to the oppression of the poor.

Keywords: *The White Tiger*, neo-colonialism, socio-economic disparities, dark comedy, dystopia

Introduction:

Dystopian literature depicts uncanny realistic stories of social injustice, anxiety, corruption, oppression, and moral degradation in an exaggerated manner. M. H. Abrams terms dystopia as a bad place and defines it as "... a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination" (Abrams

328). *The White Tiger* depicts the two extremely different sides of India through a dystopian vision. The novel's dark humour highlights the absurdities of socio-economic inequalities making its critique compelling. Aravind Adiga debuted as a promising Indian English author with the award-winning novel *The White Tiger* in 2008 which was later adapted into a feature film Ramin Bahrani in the year 2021. Adiga depicted the issues faced by the poor due to socio-economic disparities and political

apathy towards the weaker section of society (Khan and Shaheen). Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel rises from a poor boy from a village to become a self-made entrepreneur in a big city in India. The journey shows self-determination, perseverance, and courage coupled with criminal acts of fraud and murder. Unlike the traditional hero, the protagonist of the novel is grey shaded character who kills his employer to overcome the harsh realities of socio-economic disparities which are presented using metaphors like the rooster coop and the white tiger. Balram as a poor man from rural India faces all the systemic evils like an average Indian. The country in, which he is born and grows up is fraught with corruption, exploitation of the poor, class discrimination, caste discrimination, poverty, and moral degradation. In the words of Sara Schotland, "In the upside-down world of the Darkness, human beings are degraded and, if they are of the wrong caste, they have a lower status than animals" (Schotland 5). A large number of the population of India faces these severe issues while the few elites enjoy the privilege of being rich and well-connected to the political echelons of the country and can easily influence the policy-making of the government. The rich maintain their class through illegal means of accumulating wealth through bribery, corruption, exploitation of labourers, and subjugation of the poor.

The novel portrays the journey of Balram using internal monologue and the epistolary format where the protagonist writes letters to narrate his story to the Chinese Premiere Wen Jiabao. At the same time, the film adaptation makes some changes in tone, narrative structure, and characterization to enhance and suit the

themes of the new medium. Despite these changes, Ramin Bahrani's adaptation retains much of the novel's critical essence. The present study is an endeavour to analyse the dystopian themes and function of dark comedy in both mediums. The study focuses on key similarities and differences of both mediums in presenting the social commentary effectively.

Dystopia in *The White Tiger*:

In the traditional sense dystopian story is set in a speculative futuristic world. Utopia, dystopia, arcadia, and post-apocalyptic are the modes of the futuristic world created by authors where the world depicted is disoriented and the protagonist vanishes into abstraction or is given a unique status (Wheeler 2). However, *The White Tiger* depicts a real-world dystopia where the rich and poor of the country exist in the same place yet inhabit entirely different worlds. Balram Halwai is given a special status in a world gone wrong by Adiga through dark comedy. He is situated in a world in which the 'dark India' with 'small bellies' lives in systemic servitude, exploitation, and oppression, where the lower rungs of the society are caught in an inescapable "Rooster Coop". The rooster coop is a trap for the poor and downtrodden of the country. Like a chicken in a rooster coop, they are helpless and cannot dream of breaking it, even if they know their end is near. As expressed by Adiga, in the novel, "They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country" (Adiga, 173-174). Adiga, through the metaphor of a rooster coop, criticizes the oppression and exploitation of the poor painting a bleak picture of Indian democracy which serves only a select few elites. The political leaders in India do not have a concrete

vision for the country (Barbudde, 120). Once in a generation, a white tiger takes birth to defy all the odds and succeed in life. According to Alan Davis, Balram Halwai's rise in the novel is horrific and humorous at the same time. His rise exposes the Darwinian struggle of India's downtrodden (Davis, 169).

In a similar vein, the film depicts the dark side of India and reinforces this dystopian vision with stark visual contrast. The cinematography brings out the glaring difference between the opulent lives of the rich and the bleak conditions of the poor through mise-en-scene. The posh hotels and luxurious apartments exist parallel with dingy servant quarters and dilapidated villages with polluted river water, and damp and dusty air. The film portrays the biting satire of the novel in a slightly different manner. Halwai's sharp and humorous observations of power dynamics from the novel are subdued in the film as the growing anger and resentment are conveyed through facial expressions rather than reflections.

Dark Comedy as an Artistic Tool:

Dark comedy portrays social problems using gloomy and morbid satire. *The White Tiger* uses dark comedy as a key narrative strategy to underscore moral hypocrisy and the absurdity of social inequalities due to rigid systemic structure. Through witty and cynical observations, Balram lays bare the harsh realities of life that show the uncomfortable truths of 'shining' India. The readers of the novel can connect with the seriousness of the issues without immediate despair. Balram uses a disdainful tone and exaggerated metaphors where the author compares rich people with animals like stork, buffalo, boar and raven. This portrayal adds a layer of dark humour to the story. The letters to the Chinese Premier mockingly show the failure of

democratic governance in India. As described in the novel, democracy in contemporary India is in shambles. Indian political leadership lacks the proper vision of uplifting the masses who are living in poverty. A huge number of poor people live in a world without the basic infrastructure required for survival. The protagonist is very cynical about the governance in India as he says that the country suffers from three prominent diseases typhoid, cholera, and fever where the last disease is considered as the worst kind (Adiga 98).

Adiga juxtaposes dark humour with tragic incidents with comical touch in a satirical tone.

Similarly, the film uses sardonic voice-over and interesting juxtapositions to enhance the cinematic rendition of the dark comic essence of the novel. Balram's contempt for the system that exploited him and his lot is evident in several scenes at the same time, the façade of servile enthusiasm of Balram is also striking. The film attempts to delineate the protagonist as a victim of the system and at the same as an anti-hero who rebels against the system that has entrapped him.

Alterations in the Film Adaptation:

Thematically, the film is faithful to the novel, however, due to the constraints and opportunities provided by the new medium, it changes certain aspects as under. While explaining the challenges of adapting *The White Tiger*, the director Ramin Bahrani stated that capturing the tone of the novel which balances dark comedy, satire, and profound social critique was very difficult (Cremona). Bahrani confessed that he struggled "to convey the full nature of the novel in a two-hour movie" (Hornik).

1. **Narrative Structure:** Adiga uses epistolary form to narrate the story whereas the director uses first-person narration which makes the cinematic story more immersive and direct. In the novel, the protagonist, tells his life story to the Chinese Premier through a series of letters reflecting upon his past with sarcasm and wit. He uses humour to tell about the harsh realities of systemic injustice thrust upon the working class. Balram exaggerates and mocks with his stinging satire as he expresses his disillusionment with Indian democracy. His sarcasm in critiquing the system is evident in the following lines,

“Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs” (Adiga, 4).

The film abandons the epistolary form for voice-over narration that guides the audience through the story. The voice-over of the protagonist is aided by mise-en-scene that provides visuals to enhance the narrative. In the beginning fifteen minutes of the film, the tone of the story is set with the scenes juxtaposing two sides of India. Balram says that ‘the rooster coop’ was introduced in India 10000 years ago. The rooster coop symbolizes the entrapment of the poor in the systemic injustices which is shown in the juxtaposed scenes. One scene shows the rooster coop where the chicken is killed and the other shows a rickshaw puller carrying a huge load and serving the employer who comes out of a lavish house to pay a meagre amount to the labourer. The

film’s direct approach increases immediacy and engagement helping Balram’s transformation more visceral while the epistolary format of the novel makes the reader understand the psychic depth of the protagonist.

1. **Characterization:** The protagonist of the story, Balram is a complex character who triumphs in life through self-determination and cunning going against the stratified and unjust society. Both the novel and the film portray him as a smart, cunning, and opportunistic rebel. The novel’s portrayal of Balram’s employer, Ashok is ambiguous while the film humanizes him and makes him a more likeable character. This modification in the character complicates Balram’s moral justification for Ashok’s murder. The novel portrays Ashok as a weak-willed man who is caught in a web of corrupt elite class. He is uncomfortable while bribing the officials which shows that he had moments of decency occasionally. He is a passive onlooker when Balram is mistreated by his brother, Mongoose. His relationship with Balram as depicted in the novel is transactional. On the other hand, the film Ashok is shown as more humane and put in a moral dilemma on several occasions. He is concerned about Balram when his family pressurizes Balram to take responsibility for Pinky’s hit-and-run accident. Ashok’s relationship with Balram at times borders on friendship rather than master-servant relationships. Ashok’s internal conflict is caught in the film by using close-up shots. Ashok is a

more likeable character in the film which makes his murder by Balram hard to digest however, Balram's decision to murder Ashok in the novel seems to be a necessary act for self-liberation from systemic exploitation. Describing Balram's rebellion Schotland comments, "Balram resists life as a spider or a donkey or a dog. He develops the fierceness and courage to revolt. He becomes a tiger capable of taking down the landowner caste menagerie of boars, storks, and buffaloes" (Schotland 7).

Another character, Pinky's portrayal in the novel and the film are contrasting. Adiga's Pinky is cold and disrespectful towards lower-class people and Indian culture in general, however, the film portrays her more sympathetically and has a progressive mindset. Though largely similar in both mediums, there is a slight difference in the portrayal of Balram's grandmother. Her character is more elaborate in the film and there is more emphasis on her demand for money from Balram. These modifications in the characterization in the film are done to bring narrative effectiveness, thematic depth, and audience engagement.

1. **Visual Symbolism:** The rich visual symbolism of *The White Tiger* highlights a dystopian world where one India is struggling to make ends meet, while the other keeps thriving at the cost of the exploited. The novel uses literary devices like metaphors and imagery to illustrate social inequalities, the film uses visual cues like lighting contrasts, body language, colour schemes, and camera angles. The high-angle shots are used to depict the powerless characters and the low-angle shots

are used to show the dominance of characters. High-angle shots are used to show Balram in servitude extensively whereas once he becomes a killer he is shown through low-angle shots. The camera angles are effectively used to show the transfer of power. The rooster coop, the white tiger, darkness against light, mansions against shanties, etc. are used to emphasize the theme of exploitation and oppression showing the darker side of the country.

2. **Pacing and Emphasis:** Several subplots of the novel had to be undermined, removed, and altered to condense the story to fit it into cinema. The broader systemic criticism presented in the novel is absent as the focus is shifted toward the psychological transformation of the protagonist.

Conclusion:

Both Adiga and Bahrani have crafted the narrative of Balram Halwai as a dark comedy to highlight the dystopian realities of socio-economic disparities in contemporary India. The novel uses biting satire and inner reflections of Balram and the film uses cinematography, sound, music, and voice-over to critique the class oppression and social injustices. The medium of storytelling impacts the depth and delivery of the social commentary. However, both mediums use humour to underline the harsh realities of exploitation. The narratives satirize the undue advantage taken by exploiters to push down the exploited class. Ultimately, *The White Tiger* as a novel and as a film stands out as a powerful example of a dystopian world providing critical reflection and engagement.

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