



# THE CONTEXT

Quarterly e-journal of English Studies

International, Indexed & Peer Reviewed / Refereed Journal

Publication details and instructions for authors:

[www.thecontext.in](http://www.thecontext.in)

IMPACT FACTOR 4.67

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## Speaking Truth to Power: Postcolonial Insights in *The White Tiger*

**Shalu kumari**

(Research Scholar)

College of Commerce Arts & Science, (Patliputra University, Patna)

### ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of *The White Tiger*, one can come to an understanding of what modern postcolonial writers have to say about the legacy of colonialism and the challenges of the new global order. The novel documents what is colloquially known as 'the dark underbelly' of India, introducing the reader not so much to the side of India that India wants to be but to a side of India that Indians prefer to keep hidden. This paper establishes a stance within the debate about ways of representing postcolonial India by spotlighting the fact that various aspects such as the cow metaphor, the cultural implications of the Hindu religion, colonial tourism, and the approach to the global economy in *The White Tiger* need to be understood and addressed. The current literary analyses reflect that although the phrase is prominent in the era, the discussions of what postcolonial writers truly have to say are a powerful and provocative part of the discussion, often demanding that their readers reassess the way they view the world. If concepts such as postcolonial discourse exist, this can only be because there is and has been a notable global discourse taking place about the implications of colonialism and the new world order.

**Keywords:** *Postcolonial, Power, Colonialism, India, Class*

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## FULL PAPER

Postcolonial theory is a transdisciplinary subject that analyses the cultural, social, political, and economic impact of colonial powers on colonized people and countries. Colonial rule, mostly of European powers, started in the 15th century and ended around the mid-20th century. Even though the European powers ended their colonial rule in many parts of the world, the prints of their domination are still visible in non-Western countries in the form of language, religions, education, laws, and customs. Taking India as an example, the British left India in 1947, but English is still the subcontinent's Westernized medium, despite having many regional vernacular languages. *The White Tiger* foregrounds the above global fact with local and universal hues. Postcolonial theory looks at power relations, including what is called 'relations of modern imperialism,' evolving under colonial rules, of metropolitan centres until, for example, the West Indies and India became independent in the 20th century. Adiga depicts a clear separation in *The White Tiger* between the rich upper class and the poor lower class, mirroring a society where historical hierarchies have evolved but are still present. Taking place in modern-day India, the story illustrates how the wealthy and powerful control the lives of those from rural, impoverished areas, continuing unequal patterns. Balram moving from his village in "the Darkness" to the busy city of Delhi highlights the systematic repression that hinders upward mobility for the marginalized.

In her writing, Spivak explores the concept of the "subaltern" as a person who is pushed to the sidelines and stripped of their ability to act ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"). Balram personifies this subaltern identity, initially passive and obedient within the social systems he operates in. However, his inner thoughts show a growing awareness of the forces holding him back, reflecting Spivak's idea of individuals oppressed by dominant structures (Spivak). Adiga depicts these inequalities not only as a result of economic differences, but as a continuous result of postcolonial power dynamics that restrict freedom and uphold societal divisions. As he depicts, "Now, since I doubt that you have rickshaw-pullers in China—or in any other civilized nation on earth—you will have to see one for yourself. Rickshaws are not allowed inside the posh parts of Delhi, where foreigners might see them and gape. Insist on going to Old Delhi, or Nizamuddin—there you'll see the road full of them—thin, sticklike men, leaning forward from the seat of a bicycle, as they pedal along a carriage bearing a pyramid of middle-class flesh—some fat man with his fat wife and all their shopping bags and groceries (24)."

In the history of humankind, various perspectives on a given subject undergo different changes, and human encounters are of significant concern in any critical analysis. When literary studies are restricted to the physical experience of belonging, the future of paltry and tutored knowledge, preserved undiscovered on the surface of a new and superficial perception, becomes a matter of great debate. Postcolonial theory is linked to the broader concerns of democratic education in the contemporary world.

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The tools to critique everyday attitudes of superiority towards the 'Other' signify the spiritual and intellectual aftermath of colonialism – the way in which colonized experience is represented in Eurocentric representations. The project of the postcolonial critic or cultural analyst is not only to talk about this 'Otherness,' but also to talk back, to resist dominant discourses from within the text. This may involve asserting indigenous rights or voicing the subaltern. The postcolonial text may contain a colonial discourse, which is a metatext as it imparts a Eurocentric interpretation of native lands and cultures (Brett and Guyver, 2021).

The postcolonial text can be read in two ways, both against and for the colonizers. The study of colonial narratives, their functions, and effects, is essential to delimit the historical background of a text because the colonial narrative is the only discourse that has indulged in a systematic way with the varied illustrations of colonization by the colonizers. Many critics, in setting the postcolonial novels in the lively context of the present, scrutinize their results on the national culture and individual psyche. A splitting of the social subject; hybridized, not compounded. A production of sameness and difference, an articulation within stereotype. Place and displacement, location and dislodgement, home, and homelessness, are intimately linked with the domain of the unhomed. The postcolonial imagination shares some of the same territory, scouting again for the problematics of the 'third world.' The narrative of postcolonial texts is fundamentally descriptive of two distorted worlds: the world of victim and vanquisher. (Said, 2023)

### ***The White Tiger: A Brief Overview***

*The White Tiger* is a novel published in 2008. It is addressed to readers in the form of a narrative that takes them through the life journey of the protagonist, Balram Halwai. This young boy with high ambitions ends up executing successful business deals and is a large car rental owner. Despite his low socio-economic status, Balram has very successfully moved up in society. The recurring theme in the entire novel is the extent to which the socio-political and economic situation of a country spreads its hold over the individuals living within its bounds. Historical context suggests that India was colonized. The whole society is shown to be in transition and struggling to uphold some traditions, while at the same time accepting and integrating certain customs.

*The White Tiger* showcases numerous situations and incidents that are reflective of this transition as 'Bharats' step into the modern era. The title and context of the novel are derived from the Indian trade market consisting of opulent capitalists and long-established business tycoons holding strong ground in the markets of power. Civilians working as 'Indian entrepreneurs' are trampled in this internationally powerful marketplace, merely toiling for survival rather than the aim of profits. The story sets the protagonist as an entrepreneur sidelined by the upper-class, marginalized for his socio-economic background. The life and times of Indian businessmen with entrepreneurial skills are unearthed in the sharp entourage of wits, intelligence, and the storytelling abilities of Balram Halwai.

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*The White Tiger* is a novel that takes the form of a first-person memoir written by Balram Halwai, a lower-class man who became a successful entrepreneur. Balram was born in Laxmangarh, a rural village in the Ganga River valley that lacked direct exposure to the sun and where there were 185 diseases waiting to kill or deform those fighting to live. Balram's life takes shape after he is hired to work as a driver for his alcoholic landlord, Mr. Ashok—though Balram is soon promoted to Ashok's personal assistant after Ashok moves to work in New Delhi.

Ashok treats Balram well, and Balram forms a fond bond with Ashok that, in hindsight, he realizes is shaped by the caste system. While Ashok is kinder to him than most other people are, Balram is still subjected to humiliating abuses, and when Ashok drunkenly attempts to assault a woman from the village, Balram's sense of loyalty turns to resentment. This resentment is further fanned by a series of events—most notably, when Ashok refuses to help Balram cover up a hit-and-run between Balram's taxi and a young competitor, causing Balram to be blackmailed by agents of the government and abscond with a large bribe. While on the run, Balram takes another man's identity and uses his bribe as the beginning of his own business empire. He writes the latter years after these events from Bangalore, reflecting with pride on his entrepreneurial success. This can be seen in these lines of the book, “Tonight, we bring this glorious tale to a conclusion. As I was doing my yoga this morning—that's right, I wake up at eleven in the morning every day and go straight into an hour of yoga—I began reflecting on the progress of my story, and realized that I'm almost done. All that remains to be told is how I changed from a hunted criminal into a solid pillar of Bangalorean society (Adiga 191).”

### Postcolonial Themes in *The White Tiger*

*The White Tiger*, a debut novel, was first released in 2008 and was awarded the Booker Prize. Numerous postcolonial themes are evident in this debut novel. One theme is the theme of power, which is shown in various forms as superior powers tend to dismiss those who are less strong. In extension of this theme, oppression also appears as another postcolonial theme in this novel. The prevalent tyrannies and oppressions contribute to the majority of Balram's qualms. Oppression and the empire's oppressive operations invoke various sufferings and adversities, so that resistance will be a sought-after lead to living a better life.

The third postcolonial theme seen in *The White Tiger* is that the character could be seen from distinct groups of society as influenced by colonization, the rich and the poor. The narrative articulates Balram's shift from crawling to applying strength and snatching at the lovely plunder. Balram's transformation helps to illustrate the societal problems in already independent India. Regarding this, the protagonist's transformation in society is related to the concept of a postcolonial society. Post-independence India represents independent countries that continue to suffer from the colonizing forces. The narrative depicts Balram's cleverness as a profound critique of the continuous colonization. One aspect is Balram's resourcefulness in questioning Indian society. This question offers a critical insight

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into contemporary Indian society. Balram's identity and belonging problems are hidden in terms of his desire for self and community adhesion.

The social fabric in *The White Tiger* is governed by power dynamics that are not only circumscribed by class disparities but also by marginalization on the grounds of caste, as well as various forms of ethnic segregation. A bottom-of-the-heap protagonist and a first-person narrative further ensure that one becomes acquainted with the numerous vicissitudes of life of a commoner. Balram, the narrator and the protagonist, hailing from the Darkness, experiences life as essentially a constant struggle that the poor have to wage every day against contemporary systems of representation and implication. For the plebeian Indians, the system is riddled with authoritarianism. They are vulnerable to such dynamics of systemic cruelty, which sustains a world with the most extensive deprivations. One encounters a Balram who lies resigned and overwhelmed but is also infused with joy, one who amalgamates hope with despair, austere anger with a love for simplicity, and above all, subservience to the force of discrimination. Clearly, this is where Balram belongs – in 'the jungle.' In the course of the novel, it becomes horribly clear that, on the one hand, it is a game one cannot win, and that, on the other hand, participation in this game suggests corruption on Balram's part. A more heart-rending demonstration of how corruption works could scarcely be imagined. All subaltern people have to learn to participate in this game of 'corruption.'

Balram's change from a devoted servant to a self-declared "businessman" can be viewed as a defiance against the constraining power systems in his surroundings. Through a symbolic gesture of challenging authority, Balram ultimately murders his wealthy boss, Ashok, and takes over his role, disrupting the strict hierarchy that previously held him back. This action is not without moral intricacy; although it represents freedom from oppression, it also provokes ethical concerns about the outcomes of obtaining power through force. This transition symbolizes Homi Bhabha's idea of mimicry, in which individuals who have been colonized imitate the behaviours and characteristics of those who have oppressed them in order to assert their own independence. However, according to Bhabha, mimicry is fundamentally rebellious, as it confronts the very authority it strives to copy. Bhabha further writes, "It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come" (Bhabha 126). Balram's behaviour is a combination of embracing and resisting the values that he previously scorned, ultimately disrupting the established social hierarchy (Adiga 187-189).

### Character Analysis

In *The White Tiger*, the novel's focal character Balram Halwai develops drastically throughout the narrative, and his character growth serves as a crucial lens to understand the socio-economic realities of postcolonial India. As a postcolonial anti-hero, Balram drives the narrative with his thought processes and motives, challenging the traditional principles of the hero. Motivated by money-cantered concerns, Balram is driven by a greed for success and wealth that defines his anti-

heroism; this greed is a means to satisfy his basic concerns of food and shelter. Balram is characterized by a shocking honesty that makes him grow increasingly flawed and repulsive over the course of the novel. While the traditional godly Hindu hero would have suffered but ultimately remained good, Balram's heroism evolves from criminality, lying, and betrayal character flaws.

Increasingly, however, Balram becomes a postcolonial anti-hero when these class interpellations start unravelling, section by section. Balram is a social being indeed constructed by historical and class forces, but he is also a vestige of responsibility, choice, and action working within a given structure for survival and luxury. Understanding Balram this way, while he is constructed by these class forces that make him the oppressed figure, his narrative becomes a working out of these forces as they are currently shaping India. Thus, the supporting characters serve to give depth to Balram, in order to express his niche alongside all people in Indian society in creating its postcoloniality. The anti-heroism that arises in him is thus shaped equally through the personal flashes of what defines identity in capitalism and economic history, and as the imperative that stems from his circumstances.

*The White Tiger*, narrated by the social climber Balram Halwai, exemplifies the narrative of the postcolonial anti-hero. Balram Halwai is a poor and self-taught individual hailing from Laxmangarh, presently Bengaluru, aspiring to unshackle himself from the oppressive socio-economic conditions. Arising from these ambitions, Balram opposes the deep-rooted scenario of poverty and backwardness imposed upon a great many people. He is a cynical figure with one foot in the world of aspiration and the other in seething defiance. The novel is the journey of this non-prototypical hero, championing an ethos that is neither completely righteous nor completely off the mark, and in this manner, *The White Tiger* dissents against racial injustice and colonially inscribed hierarchies while also endorsing a righteous moral stand. This makes for an engrossing character study and not a straightforward anti-racist sermon. Balram is neither the 'frozen mountain peak of our great moral teachers and English poets' nor the darker anti-hero who leads an insensible life of shallow triviality, but a strange blend of qualities: an anti-hero whose greed and defiance are enmeshed with the ethical issues he raises.

The novel primarily discusses the ethical issues with reference to India's postcolonial condition. Unlike the protagonist of rags-to-riches stories, Balram's defiance follows alongside the 'vulnerability of the poor.' Unlike heroes of rags-to-riches stories, he is both victim and villain, defined more by his oppressive surroundings, his compromises, his unethical acts, and his misery than by his achievements. His journey is full of ethical crisis. He does what he does for the trodden upon India, but he doesn't spare a thought or a look for the memory of the dead driver who trusted him. Balram Halwai could have been king of a jungle, "the creature that gets born only once every generation in the jungle" (Adiga 182), but he remains symbolically representative of the jungle itself. The novel, *The White Tiger*, is a parable. A servant kills the parasite. Balram Halwai, a servant, goes on to kill his master

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to become the entrepreneur-magistrate of an independent India. In a postcolonial reading, *The White Tiger* is a parable for the age of industry.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion in this essay underlines how *The White Tiger* is heavily politicized and thus open to multiple interpretations in which various issues come into play. These issues include power shifts and the consequent reshaping of social and political systems, themes related to power and money, discrimination, and oppression. The different interpretations, in turn, lead to the discussion on Rooster and Balram's character, unsettled by his contradictory actions and manipulative or controlling attitude. This confirms the master/slave dialectical relationships that characterize Western philosophy and that live anew in postcolonial discourses. The conclusion discloses, the political thrust of *The White Tiger*, showing that oppression and superiority are embedded in traditional and postcolonial discourses. The representative protagonist Balram halwai and the profundity of the hierarchies are at the centre of the preoccupations of the postcolonial field that unfolds in this work: an incarnation of the theme in the main character, yet maintaining a sense of 'rebellion' against any kind of invasion. This is a fundamental aspect to underline because understanding is seeing, as the adage has it, and claims that a good postcolonial novel not only treats subjects of social or political relevance but unveils certain layers of things, assuming quite a serious and more complex sense in discussing *The White Tiger*. This kind of work is urgent, as it is essential to understand how far postcolonial discourse in literature is relevant in terms of reflecting specific temporal and spatial contexts while simultaneously tackling issues that involve humanity as a whole.

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