



Urbanisation in *The White Tiger*: Mapping the transformation of the being

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Abstract

This study critically examines Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, with a specific focus on its portrayal of power dynamics and social mobility in contemporary Indian society. Drawing on urban and sociological theories, this study analyses the protagonist's evolution from servitude to entrepreneurship as a lens to explore themes of class, corruption, and exploitation. Urbanisation has been a driving force behind social mobility in Delhi; the migration of people to the cities exposes them to new opportunities and experiences that were previously unavailable to them. Their exposure to the urban space has contributed to their advancement in education, individual entrepreneurship and financial security resulting in their social mobility, however, this process has not been without its challenges. By delving into the complexities of power relationships, this paper aims to shed light on the underlying social and economic structures that shape the protagonist's being and the larger narrative.

Keywords: urbanisation, social mobility, power, migration, class struggle

Introduction

Civilization has thrived in its cities since time immemorial, with each generation observing transformations inside the cities, changing their nature from ancient times to modern. Over a period of time, modern cities have prospered and altered the initial nature of the cities, especially in demographic and spatial terms. The city of Delhi has also undergone a facelift with the changes in economic policy leading to privatisation of Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs), withdrawal of subsidies, and tax benefits for corporate enterprises have altered the spatial and financial landscape of the capital. Furthermore, expansion of National Capital Region, investments in projects like metro and rapid transit systems, and construction of high-rise buildings to provide accommodation to the ever-expanding population has significantly resulted in rapid urbanization.

Delhi has been historically renowned for its illustrious past and its magnificent legacy where at least seven cities have risen and fallen on account of varied reasons over the years. Its past splendor prompted the British to appropriate this historical space to develop its seat of power. This idea is reiterated in R.E. Frykenberg's *The Study of Delhi*, where he mentions that the capital

has served as the centre of political power despite intermittent interruptions for centuries. Thus... a ruler came to power in India, no ruler could be *seen* as Ruler of India unless and until his citadel was indeed fixed at Delhi (5).

In literature, the capital has been courted as 'beloved' by rulers while the splendor of its past has never been neglected since its reputation as the city that had been the capital of empires; Indraprastha, Lal Kot, Siri, Ferozabad, Tughlaqabad, Shahjanabad, and New Delhi, supersedes it.

The various rulers of the region made great efforts to create a lasting impression by constructing massive forts, fortified frontiers, beautiful gardens and, strong citadels. The structures that stood as the emblem of ambition in different citadels, now lay in varying states of ruin and disrepair, charting the decline of empires over the years. Since 1931, initially under the British and later under independent India

since 1947, Delhi has served as the seat of Government for India. Let's keep in mind that the physical infrastructure that was constructed, by Lutyen and Baker, to demonstrate the grandeur of the British Empire, was subsequently made to represent democratic institutions by the Government of free India.

Delhi has historically served as a major political hub and has also emerged as a significant cultural and intellectual centre while being home to India's leading Universities that continue to attract greater inflow of young migrants. The change in the urban scape was coupled with the fact that Delhi has emerged as a major commercial centre in Northern India in the post liberalisation period resulting in the outpouring of population in the ever-expanding National Capital Region. This inflow was largely credited to the economic liberalization that catapulted Delhi into an altered economic sphere, which signaled a new stage in the development and perception of the city after the 1990s.

Consequently, the capital is home to people of different regions, races, classes, cultures, and languages co-existing harmoniously. Wirth mentions that the city has "historically been the melting-pot of races, people and customs, and a most favorable breeding ground of new biological and cultural hybrids" and has celebrated the individual differences visualised in the city (66). Therefore drawing the conclusion that the development of cities is one of the most opulent factors of the modern era, which is assisted by the mobility of people to urban centres following their urbanisations.

In *The White Tiger*, the narrator utilises ominous humour to tell the tale of his journey from poverty to affluence, with urbanisation and capitalism playing a significant role. Adiga is able to examine the issues that exist in an urban setting via the narrative of Balram, the narrator. It helps to have an expanded perspective of Delhi by presenting contrasts within the urban agglomeration's concrete jungle and malls and the impoverished slum dwellings, Old Delhi and New Delhi, the economically successful and the socially and economically disadvantaged, the differences in the

relationships between the urban couple and the rural couple, the naivety of the newcomer, and the corruption that permeates the city.

The White Tiger commences with the narrator mentioning India's shortcomings, such as lack of clean water facilities, hygiene awareness, discipline, and manners. Economic deprivation is a major factor in migration, affecting both poor and rich households. With his description, Adiga attempts to convey the harsh reality of India—a reality that political leaders and the ruling establishment frequently bury under the barrage of "garlands, small take-home sandalwood statues of Gandhi" that are given to guests in accordance with International Protocol (5). Early on in the narrative, the narrator toys with the notion of worshipping 36,000,004 Gods in order to shed light on his "dark story," and he contrasts their meagre efforts with those of the nation's leaders. This is where the concept of buying political influence to gain social mobility is first presented. He then emphasises that in order to succeed, he must respect politicians even though they don't really carry out their duties, and that it "pays to play both ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time" (9).

As Biswajit Banerjee's study, "The Role of the Informal Sector in the Migration Process" reveals that more than half of the city's migrant population joined the informal sector, encouraged by ease of entry and non-requirement of formal education, and only a small section of this population entered the organised sector (420)

Due to the capital's burgeoning population and the lack of housing facilities the regular flow of people from other parts of India for employment in the unorganized sector is a matter of concern. Both metropolitan areas and rural areas have degrees of corruption and the political games that are played out frustrating economic development are largely to blame for the extreme poverty that drives people into the city. Therefore, one needs to comprehend rural politics that cause individuals to migrate from the village to urban centres in order to fathom the enormity of the problem.

According to Ravenstein's 'push-pull' theory, population growth is the consequence of two forces working in opposite directions. The first is the ability to encourage population migrations, whereas the second is the ability to obstruct population flows (9). Push factors motivate individuals to leave their homes and relocate, whereas pull ones entices migrants to new locations. High unemployment, for example, is a typical push factor, but an availability of jobs is an effective pull factor. Generally speaking, 'push' power like high unemployment tends to be more dominating than 'pull' power like abundance of availability of jobs. Through the description of Balram's village, Laxmangarh, Adiga illustrates the operation of this theory in *The White Tiger* through the dysfunctional system of governance that has failed to provide the villagers with the basic standard of living- such as electricity, water supplies, and for the children, means to a nutritious diet, ironically describing it as a "typical Indian village paradise" (19). If the need comes, corruption spreads like a wildfire since it is such a contagious illness. Corrupt practises frequently propagate from top to bottom. If the top authority is corrupt, they can manipulate the lower level employees to become corrupt so they can support themselves. Instead of selling the school uniforms that were provided for the pupils in an adjacent village, the Balram's local schoolteacher took

the lunch money that was granted through a government project. Although he hadn't received his wage in months, he wasn't held accountable for what he done and was instead applauded for pulling it off so easily. The character of Balram, the narrator, is described so vividly that the change in his thought process of being one who was deprived facilities in his village, that it can be treated as a pattern that works parallel to the impact of urbanisation. The city is personified and presented as if it provides a corruptive influence on the protagonists who enter its porous boundaries seeking better standards of living.

Concerning the bribery and corruption in Delhi, Mukesh remarked, "We need a fixer. He'll arrange for us to have the necessary minister interview. That is how Delhi operates (121). And with that, Adiga starts outlining in great detail how corruption and bribes are ingrained in politics and are an essential part of the system to gain socially and economically. Ashok's grumbling upon leaving the President's House, the headquarters of the Indian Government, when he remarks, "We're driving past Gandhi, after just having given a bribe to a minister. It's a fucking joke, isn't it?" (137).

This showcases how politicians often engage in corrupt practices to maintain their power and influence, while criminals use violence and intimidation to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, the two groups often overlap, with politicians taking bribes from criminal organizations or even working directly with them. This creates a vicious cycle of corruption and crime that is difficult to break. In many cases, innocent people are caught in the crossfire, as they become victims of violence or are unfairly targeted by law enforcement, all this while, allowing Balram to be a silent spectator to the power struggles that allow the mobility of classes, while he drives the car around the city.

Economic growth and urbanisation are two sides of the same coin since urbanisation is a prerequisite for economic growth in any region or nation in the globe. The extent and character of social, political, and economic change, which differs between countries and regions, have an impact on the process that follows. The dispersion of economic prospects in terms of space is reflected in the movement of migrants from their parent source to the metropolis (Cecilia Tacoli). Due to a demographic imbalance brought on by the population's fast increase, Delhi is now one of India's most densely inhabited ^[1] cities. Aravind Adiga depicts a parallel description of the slums when Balram reaches the slums behind the malls,

all these construction workers who were building the malls and the giant apartment buildings lived here... These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh (260).

The hopeless migrants eventually find themselves living on footpaths, under flyovers, on the side of the road in a line of corrugated iron that frequently has blue tarpaulin sheets as the roof, or in forgotten areas of Delhi that seem too dangerous for people to live in. These constant visuals of the harsh reality of the vast division between the classes in the city, where everyone relocates to attain better standards of living, which are exemplified by the narrator may be noted as subconsciously contributing to the frustration that erupts in him eventually.

Furthermore, Adiga's throwing light on the stark contrast between the rich and the poor in the city with the hit-and-run that Ashok, Pinky, and Balram get involved with acts like the final nail in the coffin. The occurrences of road accidents have only but increased in the capital, with around thirty per cent of those being as a result of hit-and-runs^[2]. The affluent are frequently the ones behind the wheel, and the unfortunate ones who are struck by the wheels are frequently those who reside next to the road. The conversation between Ashok and Balram that followed the incident's events shed light on the extent of servitude Balram has with his employer along with his perception of the people who sadly continue to survive on the other unfortunate end of the spectrum of class-

'Oh she was one of those people.'

'Who live under the flyovers and bridges, Sir.'

'In that case, will anyone miss her...?'

'I don't think so, sir. You know how those people in the Darkness are ... they don't know the names of their own children. Her parents –if they're even here in Delhi, if they even know where she is tonight –won't go to the police' (164).

This highlights a number of issues in the social strata. The tragedy sheds light on the reality of Delhi's unreported road fatalities, which include a large number of unidentifiable victims. One of the many troubling issues that may be noted in the text is the fact that Ashok breathed a sigh of relief that the child who was killed in the accident came from a different segment of society—that segment that is frequently overlooked as merely invisible and is frequently seen at traffic signals, begging or selling items. For many people who had moved from rural regions, the effects of urbanisation that had been beneficial for Ashok and Balram (towards the end) had not been favourable. Their identities, lives, and experiences had been ignored as they had been relegated to living under the flyovers.

In Adiga's novel, Ashok forced Balram to assume responsibility of driving under the influence of alcohol and accidentally running over someone as a result of which, Pinky was spared the penalties. This displayed how the people who are affluent have the liberty of refusing to take responsibility for their actions and instead blame others, frequently those who report to them. The scapegoat accepts the blame of their employers in a show of unwavering love to their "masters," and they do not rebel against being wrongfully accused of the crimes. The rising practice of such incidents taking place in urban cities is described in the following passage from *The White Tiger*:

When you are in Delhi, repeat the story I have told you to some good, solid middle-class man of the city. Tell him you heard this wild, extravagant, impossible story from some driver about being framed for a murder his master committed on the road. And watch as your good, solid middle-class friend's face blanches. Watch how he swallowed hard – how he turns away to the window – watch how he changes the topic at once (169).

Occurrences like these are common in Delhi, with the driver frequently being held accountable for the wrongdoings of their wealthy employers. The drivers' framing "is again the abuse of capital that purchases a poor man in the name of faithfulness and devotion" (Arora 169). The metropolis draws people from the villages and exploits their naiveté

and submissive disposition for its own ends; the drivers are coaxed through bribes to own up to the lapses and crimes perpetrated by their employers.

Additionally, *The White Tiger* challenges readers to comprehend the mechanics underlying the link between inequality and the criminality that emerges within. Sara D. Schotland poses a similar query when she wonders if the violent crime is a kind of protest against the oppressive circumstances. "More crucially, is it excused by such conditions? Aravind Adiga tells the shocking, apparently amoral story of a young man who brutally murders his employer—and gets away with it"^[2].

As a result of his ex-wife Pinky and deceased employee Ashok calling him "half-baked" and making fun of his ignorance of obvious facts, Balram begins his story by recalling how he and thousands of other Indians came to be "half-baked" and how his encounters with old geometry books at the tea shop and news articles about politics led to the development of the very entrenched belief system. He refers to his employer's murder as "an act of entrepreneurship" (11). The narrator presents the fact that he committed a horrifying crime at the beginning of the narrative and that he was sentenced to death for it. The narrator establishes early on that he committed a terrible crime for which the police were looking for him. He progressively reveals his crime and its motivation. Balram argues that the money that the landlords gave off as a bribe to the politicians so that they could exempt them from paying the tax was not simply theirs, despite the fact that they treated him inhumanely and accused him of a crime he did not commit. It was money that belonged to the nation's common citizens and was used for their advantages. It is clear from Balram's internal deliberations that his crime of robbery and murder was dexterously planned out and was not an act of savagery committed in the spur of the moment. Balram's "resourceful if unprincipled individual resorts to violence" does so because he is unable to see any other way to improve his situation to rise in class (Schotland 2). Balram does not regret murdering his boss because he sees it as a way to get independence and a new identity. He excuses the killing by saying, "All I wanted was the chance to be a man - and for that, one murder was enough" (318).

Adiga illustrates the deep-rooted quest for power and rising from his current economic and social status by having Balram kill Ashok by using a shattered bottle of exclusive beverage- Johnny Walker Black. The very bottle that highlights the wealth difference between wealthy and poor is the cause of Ashok's demise. Balram notes how the amount of alcohol that the wealthy may consume in a single evening is equal to his monthly pay. Through committing the crime, Balram is able to escape the vicious cycle of poverty that he was born into. Delhi, according to Adiga, is a notorious city where the corrupt syphon off the money needed for the ordinary people and the family has a firm hold on anyone who wants to live a life other than the one they currently lead.

The brutality meted out to those who lack resistance is shown in the urban context by the horrifying metaphor of the Rooster Coop, which is a wire-mesh cage of "hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters" that peck and defecate on one another for their survival (147).

The world of politics, crime, violence, and corruption are intertwined and work together to their mutual advantage in obtaining social mobility creating a sad reality that plagues

societies throughout history, and it continues to be a major issue today. The growth of urban areas is one of the most significant developments of the contemporary age. However, the influx of people into cities has put a strain on infrastructure and resources, leading to overcrowding and pollution. Additionally, the benefits of urbanisation have not been evenly distributed, with some groups benefiting more than others. A dysfunctional system of government that is unable to fulfill the basic demands of life is caused by corrupt practises that are inextricably linked to the system. In order to advance socially and economically, corruption and bribery are crucial components of politics, which feeds a vicious cycle of crime and corruption. Urbanisation and economic expansion are two sides of the same coin, and *The White Tiger's* narrator probes readers to explore the connection between injustice and criminality and to interrogate the phenomena as a form of protest against repressive conditions. Aravind Adiga examines urbanisation and capitalism through his narrative that chronicles Balram's growth from a boy, known as Munna in Laxmangarh, steeped in servitude under the shackles of a class-based rural set-up to a successful entrepreneur, Ashok Sharma, in an urban set-up. Balram's transformation can be traced by comprehending a set of processes that have gone into the making of the character's being courtesy rapid urbanization that affects everyone who relocates to the city. The metamorphosis of Balram's being also highlights examples of class strife that lead to criminal activity and political meddling in an effort to advance one's social status. Despite these obstacles, there are many organisations putting forth endless efforts to combat crime and corruption by fostering a more just and equitable society, from local campaigners to worldwide watchdogs. There is optimism that these problems will be overcome in the process of creating a better society for future generations, even if the path ahead remains arduous and challenging. In order to overcome these problems, policymakers must address these challenges and work towards creating more equitable opportunities for all citizens which includes investing in infrastructure and education, promoting entrepreneurship and innovation, and addressing issues of inequality and discrimination. With the right policies in place, urbanisation can continue to be a powerful force for positive change.

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11. The total area of Delhi is 1,483sq. km and the population density, according to the 2011 Census, is 11,320 per sq. km, which is much higher than the national average of 382 per sq.km. For further information see Census, 2011.