

Subverting the Hegemonic Order: Caste, Power, and Resistance in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the insidious function of cultural hegemony in sustaining caste-based domination within Indian society, specifically in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. The study examines how consent, coercion and ideological dominance normalize systematic exploitation and uphold long-standing caste and class hierarchies using Antonio Gramsci's theoretical framework. The paper critiques caste based disparities that underpin elite hegemonic power by analyzing the protagonist Balram Halwai. Adiga's representation of Balram's progression from enslavement to entrepreneurship underscores his struggle against oppressive powers to confirm how caste and economic exploitation are interwoven. In addition, to examine the evolving nature of cultural dominance modern theories from Nancy Fraser and Stuart Hall are employed along with Gramsci's foundational ideas. The emergence and extraction of social class within a capitalist structure is clarified by Hall's articulation theory and Fraser's account of neoliberal identity-based injustices. *The White Tiger*, according to this study, is a striking critique of cultural hegemony principally in its depiction of institutional connivance and infused servitude. The paper underlines that the transformative power of literature has ability to challenge dominant power structures by situating Adiga's work within greater debates of resistance and hegemony. To achieve social equality in the society, the paper fosters for counter-hegemonic initiatives that dismantle deeply entrenched hierarchical structures.

Keywords: *Hegemonic power, Caste oppression, Cultural dominance, Ideological control, Resistance, Economic exploitation.*

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Introduction

Antonio Gramsci introduced the conception of hegemony which symbolizes the supremacy of a social group maintained through ideological processes and cultural mechanisms rather than forceful action. This paper investigates Gramsci's theory and applies it to inspect how social order serves the structure of oppression deeply rooted within Indian society. Historically presented as an inherent social order, the caste system is wielded through cultural and ideological control exercised by dominant groups. Selections from the Prison Notebooks focus on Gramsci's insight describing hegemony as the "spontaneous consent" specified by the populace to the guidelines of the ruling class connect intensely with the caste dynamics in *The White Tiger*. The ideological system influences public opinion and social norms, ultimately shaping a culturally established society in which the elites are privileged, and the lower class is only maintained within existing hierarchy.

The persistence of caste oppression and its foundation can be well understood through the theoretical lens of Gramsci. The concept of "common sense" by Gramsci is a combination of cultural values, morals, societal beliefs and traditions justifies and explains why lower-caste individuals accept oppression. *The White Tiger* challenges this standardization of oppression by addressing the historical and ideological reinforcements that perpetuate lower castes to remain servile positions. Adiga deconstructs these hegemonic structures, through Balram Halwai's journey, exposing both the consent and coercion that sustain them.

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga presents a sharp analysis of India's socio-economic setting, exhibiting long shaped systemic oppression of caste-based inequalities. Portrayal of Balram's journey and his transformation from a rural servant to a successful entrepreneur in the novel, not only mirrors his journey as an individual contention but also his manifestation of broader political and economic hegemonies. Although his rise was an act of individual choice, yet it reveals the entrenched structure of caste oppression and economic inequalities. The protagonist Balram, is Adiga's lens, to reveal how ambitions of marginalized can be product of hegemonic manipulations forcing them to adopt morally ambiguous methods to achieve power.

Literature Review

The concept of cultural hegemony in relation to Indian social structure and caste has been thoroughly examined under the umbrella of literary and social studies. The concept of the 'dominant caste' presented by the sociologist M. N. Srinivas, in *Caste in Modern India*, emphasizes that how caste groups employ socio economic strategies to uphold existing power

system. Additionally, these dominant castes establish cultural standards to perpetuate their hegemony to validate their power, and exploit others. Srinivas's analysis demonstrates that caste dominance is not solely a function of wealth or political control but is deeply interwoven with ideological frameworks that reinforce submission (Srinivas 18). E.P. Thompson's theory of "ruling ideas" further contributes to this understanding by arguing that dominant ideologies emerge from the material interests of the ruling class. His assertion that "ruling ideas are the ideal expressions of dominant material relationships" (Thompson 9) aligns with Adiga's depiction of caste hegemony in *The White Tiger*, where economic, social, and ideological factors collectively sustain oppression. Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses, elaborated in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, is particularly relevant in analyzing how caste ideologies are reinforced through institutions such as education, religion, and media (Althusser 135). Adiga's novel critiques these ideological apparatuses, illustrating how they perpetuate caste oppression under the guise of tradition and morality.

Michel Foucault's insights into power structures, particularly his theory of "disciplinary power," further illuminate how institutions mold individuals to conform to social norms. Foucault's notion that knowledge functions as a tool of transformation (Foucault 119) provides a compelling framework for analyzing how caste-based subjugation is both learned and internalized. Additionally, contemporary theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Stuart Hall offer nuanced perspectives on cultural hegemony. Fraser's critique of neoliberal recognition-based justice highlights how caste identities are manipulated to sustain economic disparities (Fraser 54), while Hall's articulation theory elucidates how caste and class identities are historically and culturally constructed (Hall 28).

These theoretical frameworks provide a critical lens for analyzing *The White Tiger*, demonstrating how Adiga's novel encapsulates and critiques the hegemonic structures that perpetuate caste oppression. Scholars such as Harleen Ruprah and Susan Bayly have similarly emphasized that Balram's rise is not merely an act of individual ambition but a commentary on the exploitative nature of systemic inequality (Ruprah 45; Bayly 112). Through this study, *The White Tiger* can be well analyzed incorporating these insights, placing it within a broader sense of interrogating power, resistance, and cultural hegemony examining intellectual tradition.

Methodology

To study and investigate cultural hegemony and caste oppression in *The White Tiger*, a qualitative textual analysis approach has been applied. The focus of the research is a close reading of relevant passages from the novel to validate the concept of consent, coercion, and ideological domination. Gramsci's theory has been considered to investigate hegemony as the foundation of the analysis. In addition, Fraser's and Hall's perspectives on evolving power dynamics are also used as complementary to Gramsci's theory. The study also explores the systematic oppression and ultimately subverts hegemonic structures by examining the transformation of the protagonist, Balram. To contextualize the findings further, some scholarly critiques and contemporary theoretical interpretations have been incorporated as secondary sources.

Results and Analysis

Manifestations of Hegemony in *The White Tiger*

Adiga's *The White Tiger* vividly illustrates the characteristics of hegemony through its depiction of systemic exploitation and ideological control. The following sections analyze these characteristics in detail:

1. Cultural Indoctrination and Acceptance of Subjugation

Gramsci's concept of consent is central to understanding the 'Rooster Coop' metaphor in the novel. Balram describes the "Rooster Coop" as a system where individuals internalize their subjugation, perceiving it as their natural fate. This acceptance is reinforced by social norms and cultural narratives that portray servitude as honorable and rebellion as dangerous. He observes, "The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (Adiga 175), highlighting how cultural narratives sustain economic exploitation. Nancy Fraser's critique of cultural recognition applies here, as caste identity is leveraged to justify systemic inequality (Fraser 71). Balram's internal struggle—oscillating between loyalty to his employer and resentment of his exploitation—epitomizes the power of consent in maintaining hegemonic control.

2. Economic Oppression and Systemic Coercion

While consent plays a significant role, coercion remains a critical mechanism of hegemony in *The White Tiger*. The novel depicts systemic violence, corruption, and economic disparities that reinforce caste hierarchies. Landowners and politicians collude to ensure the subjugation of the poor, using intimidation and violence to suppress dissent. Balram's observations about the complicity between the police and the wealthy highlight the entrenchment of coercive

power: “The police and the politicians are in each other’s pockets. One hand washes the other” (Adiga 99). Stuart Hall’s theory of articulation demonstrates how these alliances between institutions create and perpetuate dominant ideologies (Hall 30). Balram’s recognition of these coercive dynamics propels him to commit an act of rebellion that, while morally ambiguous, serves as a critique of systemic corruption.

The economic system in *The White Tiger* perpetuates a rigid class hierarchy, in which the wealthy control the resources, and the poor are trapped in cycles of poverty with little chance of upward mobility. “I had to work for them for nothing, for free, just to learn how to survive in the world of the rich”(Adiga 143). This illustrates the exploitative relationship between the rich and the poor. Balram’s sarcastic remark, “In the old days, there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies” (Adiga 64), highlights the intersection of caste and economic disparity, further cementing the role of cultural hegemony in shaping systemic exploitation. Marxist theorists like Louis Althusser also discuss how the capitalist state apparatus functions to reproduce economic relations that favour the elites.

3. Ideological Control through Institutions

Gramsci’s theory of ideological domination is reflected in the novel’s critique of education and religion as tools of control. Schools for the poor, depicted as underfunded and corrupt, fail to empower lower-caste children, effectively maintaining the status quo. Adiga exposes the corruption in education system as Balram’s schoolteacher, Mr. Krishna steals government’s money allocated for school lunches and uniforms and justifies his act by saying that he himself had not been paid for six months. “The schoolteacher was stealing our lunch money. He hadn’t given us uniforms, or books, or anything but beatings.” (Adiga 35) This highlights how teachers, rather than supporting and educating students, misuse the system for their own financial benefit, depriving children of their fundamental right to education. The disparity between rural and urban education becomes evident, as this quote emphasizes the significant differences in opportunities available to the privileged and the underprivileged, highlighting the systemic disregard for rural and economically disadvantaged communities. “The rich children went to schools run by nuns and wore crisp white uniforms, while we sat under a tree and taught ourselves from books.” (Adiga 35)

Foucault’s analysis of power and discipline further elucidates how social institutions shape individual behavior and beliefs (Foucault 184). Religion, in particular, is portrayed as

reinforcing caste-based oppression by emphasizing submission and acceptance of one's social position. Ideological control is pervasive in *The White Tiger* as the ruling classes justify their control through ideologies that promote passivity, fatalism, and submission, especially in relation to caste and class. "You see, I know what I am. And I know what I can be. I am not a slave anymore". (Adiga 240). This marks a moment of ideological shift for Balram, as he rejects the worldview that subjugated him and embraces the possibility of upward mobility through any means necessary.

4. Reinterpreting Cultural Narratives and Acts of Defiance

Balram's transition from servitude to rebellion represents a rupture from hegemonic dominance. His violent act against his employer represents a refusal to accept the entrenched narratives that perpetuate subjugation. Harleen Ruprah contends that Balram's ethically complex defiance underscores the desperation of those ensnared within oppressive structures, echoing Gramsci's assertion that counter-hegemonic struggles emerge from lived realities of suppression (IJAR 4). His transformation challenges cultural constructs that legitimize exploitation, yet his ultimate success remains ethically fraught, underscoring the nuanced nature of resistance within oppressive frameworks. "I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break free of it, It requires masters like Mr. Ashok, who, despite his many virtues, was not much of a master, to be weeded out, and excellent subordinates like myself to take his place" (Adiga 320). The narrative suggests that dismantling hegemonic structures necessitates both strategic defiance and a conscious rejection of ingrained ideological hierarchies. The elite class (capitalists) luxuriates at the expense of the working class (proletariats), a reality Balram acknowledges: "A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different. My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from..." (Adiga 27)

The social divide between wealth and poverty is deeply ingrained, with the underprivileged class being cast as inherently subordinate. "In the darkness of night, I could hear the rich people talking about 'us'—the poor, and 'them'—the rich. We had no place to stand in their world" (Adiga 45). This illustrates the cultural conditioning that entrenches inequality, positioning the poor as permanently marginalized. "The Rooster Coop, that's where we are, we've been told we're not good enough to be anything else, not good enough to change. We're slaves, in the hearts of our own hearts" (Adiga 213). Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony is pertinent here, arguing that the ruling class sustains dominance not only through economic and political power

but also through cultural control. Ideological norms surrounding caste and class serve to naturalize inequality. Scholars such as Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu have further explored how cultural dominance perpetuates social disparity through deeply entrenched structures of power.

5. Political Supremacy and Structural Corruption

In *The White Tiger*, political dominance is reinforced by the symbiotic relationship between politicians, bureaucrats, and business elites who manipulate governance for their own interests. Adiga likens political power in India to a gateway to perpetual privilege.

“For political leaders, an election is an enormous business. The Great Socialist admits to embezzling one billion rupees from the Darkness and depositing it in a bank account in a little, lovely country in Europe populated by white people with black money.” (Adiga 98)

Rather than serving public welfare, the political machinery functions as a safeguard for elite privileges. "The Great Socialist doesn't want to change things. He wants to keep things just the way they are. He wants to keep the poor people in their place" (Adiga 87). This highlights how political leaders sustain an illusion of reform while preserving systemic inequality.

"The police and the politicians are in each other's pockets. One hand washes the other, they say" (Adiga 99). Balram's reflection reveals how corruption pervades governance, turning law enforcement into an instrument of elite protection rather than justice. Gramsci's theory of political hegemony elucidates this reality, asserting that dominance is secured not merely through coercion but through the manufacture of consent, making oppressive systems appear beneficial to all. Corruption is further evident in bribery practices, exemplified by Mr. Ashok's efforts to manipulate government officials for his family's business interests. Bribery, often described as "golden gloves," ensures leniency from law enforcement.

"It's amazing. The moment you show cash, everyone knows your language" (Adiga 177). Gramsci's Prison Notebooks discuss how ruling elites embed their interests within political and social discourses, reinforcing hegemony and preserving their authority. (Gramsci 1971)

6. Power through Coercion and Manufactured Consent

In *The White Tiger*, hegemony is sustained through both forceful control and ideological compliance. While coercion manifests in explicit violence and oppression, consensus is forged through cultural and psychological conditioning.

"A master is a master. And you are nothing. That is the way the world works" (Adiga 112). This encapsulates the coercive nature of hegemony—those in power deploy both physical subjugation and mental conditioning to ensure continued compliance.

Balram's ultimate act of defiance—murdering his employer—is framed as a necessary rupture from the system. "I killed the man who gave me food, but I did it for my family" (Adiga 235). This moment represents a rejection of both coercion and ideological submission. He asserts control over his fate: "All I needed was the ability to be a man and for that — one murder was enough" (Adiga 318). This aligns with Gramsci's perspective that hegemony is sustained not solely through force but also by fostering consent among the oppressed, who internalize the values that legitimize their subordination. Michel Foucault's work on institutional power further complements this analysis, demonstrating how social structures normalize and perpetuate systemic control, making dominance appear natural and inevitable.

7. Regional and Global Influences on Socioeconomic Inequality

Although *The White Tiger* primarily critiques domestic inequities, the novel also highlights how global economic forces shape local conditions, particularly through the dissemination of capitalist ideologies. "The foreigner...comes here and buys our land, sells it, makes millions, and leaves. What do they know about us?" (Adiga 189). This underscores the pervasive influence of global economic policies on regional markets, illustrating how international capital exerts hegemonic control over local economies. The penetration of multinational corporations and foreign investment often exacerbates existing disparities, reinforcing economic subjugation. Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory contextualizes this issue, arguing that global capitalism perpetuates hierarchies where developing nations remain economically subordinate. (Wallerstein 1974). Adiga's critique aligns with this theory, emphasizing how foreign capital shapes Indian socioeconomic realities, ensuring continued dominance of global financial elites.

8. Institutional Mechanisms of Sustained Inequality

Institutions in *The White Tiger*—such as law enforcement, the judiciary, and education—function not as instruments of justice but as mechanisms to perpetuate elite dominance. These institutions, rather than promoting equity, reinforce systemic disparities.

"The police, the courts, the media—they all serve the rich" (Adiga 125).

This quote exemplifies how state apparatuses protect elite interests while marginalizing the lower classes. In Balram's case, justice is entirely performative. When falsely accused of a crime, he is coerced into taking responsibility, demonstrating the extent to which the legal system is skewed against the poor.

"A man on a bicycle getting killed—the police don't even have to register a case. A man on a motorbike getting killed—they would have to register that. A man in a car getting killed—they would have thrown me in jail" (Adiga 309).

Gramsci's view on institutions as instruments of ideological reinforcement is evident here. These entities shape public consciousness, normalizing structural inequality. Similarly, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power illustrates how institutions condition individuals into accepting their societal roles, sustaining hierarchical control through a combination of coercion and ideological manipulation.

Discussion

The research findings on *The White Tiger* highlight the complex structure of cultural hegemony exhibiting the role of consent, coercion, and ideological control collaborating systemic exploitation. Caste and class oppression, as portrayed by Adiga, demonstrates how the underprivileged reinforce the economic and social system through cultural narratives. The research underscores the transformation of hegemony in current capitalist society integrating the conceptual understanding of theorists such as Nancy Fraser (2009) and Stuart Hall (1983). The novel exposes the internalization of these hierarchies by the individuals and how it perpetuate the cycles of oppression attacking the structural inequalities rooted in India's socio-political order.

The transformation journey of Balram from servile to self-made entrepreneurship displays an irony of resilience. His rebellion approach signifies an up rise from the shackles of centuries old power structures, though laden with moral scepticism. Social mobility can be critically questioned on his up rise in this exploitative system; however his rebelliousness challenges the traditional norms. Consequently, Adiga's account urges readers to reflect on the true cost of success in a corrupt hierarchical society. Instead of focusing effortless contrast between good and bad, the novel discloses the moral dilemmas experienced by those grappling with structural obstacles. Offset hegemonic struggles significantly affect not only the lived experiences but also typically arising from the system, they attempt to subvert, stated by Antonio

Gramsci(1971). This complex portrayal of power and resistance is consistent with Gramsci's theory.

From an extensive literary point of view, *The White Tiger* can be positioned amidst global writings that attack systematic oppression. For validation, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe addresses colonialism's impact on indigenous societies and reveals how cultural hegemony modifies identity and resistance. Equally, impact of institutionalized inequality within capitalist economies on the exploited working class across different historical and geographical contexts as portrayed in *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair (Sinclair 1906). By highlighting these similarities, Adiga's larger literary conversations can be viewed to scrutinize the elements of power, economic inconsistency, and the voice of marginalized.

To re-examine and explore the counter hegemonic movements and its impact in the current Indian literature and cinema, these themes could be further develop for future research. For the further understanding of complex system of caste based oppression and conflict rising in a rapidly globalizing society, an interdisciplinary scrutiny integrating cultural studies with sociology and political science can shed more light. Additionally, to understand the links between caste class and capitalism investigating how neoliberal economic policies outline social hierarchies. Further scholarly awareness would be vital to figure out how geometrical power relationships are influenced by globalization and how cultural hegemony is questioned in the colonized societies.

Eventually, *The White Tiger* emerges as a rebuke and an appeal for an action. The novel compels readers to rethink cultural as well as institutional elements upholding social injustice by showcasing the deeply embedded systems of inequity. As exposed by Adiga, Literature has the knack to elucidate unseen structures of subjugation, spark debate and enthused reformation. *The White Tiger* proves a distressing manifestation on the complexities of power, ambition, and resistance in a globe where economic disparities are escalating.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga, in *The White Tiger* crafts an exquisite representation of socio-economic, political, and cultural systems that underpin the material possessions and authority in modern India. The novel tackles multiple aspects of hegemony so as to contour and protract the existing status in the light of Balram Halwai's transformation from an indigent rural village to a thriving entrepreneur. These aspects include violent tactics intended to uphold power structures such as authority, financial servitude, ideological control, cultural subjugation and the coercion. "Great

socialist” and collusion of police and judiciary are two examples which signify political corruption coincides with Antonio Gramsci's theory of political hegemony, where state apparatus, ideological and cultural institutions maintain by the dominating ruling class. Gramsci's assertion that the ruling class constructs the economic relations to uphold their own power is reiterated in the form of economic system and rigid class hierarchy in *The White Tiger*. In addition, the novel also examines Gramsci's concept of cultural norms and ideological values where the ruling class utilize culture to strengthen their social position and create discrimination seem natural holding the poor in a state of servile.

The White Tiger powerfully uncovers features of cultural hegemony exposing the systemic control through consent, coercion, and ideological domination. The novel encourages the readers by dissecting the caste-based exploitation to tackle India's socio-economic landscape under the influence of hegemony. Balram's violent break from the "Rooster Coop," affirms his rejection of these ideologies and also symbolizes confrontation against the hegemonic structure. The system which is incredibly unfair reflects constant struggle for autonomy. Thus Adiga's account, underscores the intellectual and cultural factors hampering unquestionable social amends.

The mechanism of consent, coercion and ideological supremacy promote global and regional disparity awakening Adiga's readers. Literature plays an important role in elevating marginalized and questioning existing structures. The present study underlines the significance of counter-hegemonic attempts longing for a society with greater justice and equity relying on Gramsci's insights along with recent theorist such as Nancy Fraser and Stuart Hall. *The White Tiger* ultimately reinforces literature's vital role in opposing prevailing perspectives and favoring social justice through an energetic manifestation overturning oppressive frameworks and fostering radical shifts.

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