



# The White Tiger as a Symbol of Literary Resistance

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## Abstract

*Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger stands as a potent symbol of literary resistance, challenging dominant narratives about modern India's economic progress. Drawing from postcolonial and subaltern theory, the novel foregrounds the voice of Balram Halwai—a character from the margins—whose gritty, self-reflective monologue dismantles the idealised vision of a shining, globalised India. Adiga employs the metaphor of the “white tiger” to emphasise the singularity and rarity of rebellion, presenting Balram as a subversive figure who breaks free from the “rooster coop” of caste, poverty, and servitude. Rooted in the tradition of Indian resistance literature, the novel echoes earlier works that gave voice to the oppressed, while sharply shifting the focus toward post-liberalisation socio-economic inequalities. Animal imagery—such as the rooster, buffalo, and tiger—is used not only to expose dehumanisation but also to highlight rebellion born of desperation. Balram's moral ambiguity and his eventual turn to murder blur the lines between victimhood and villainy, emphasising that resistance is often ethically fraught. Balram's voice emerges from a world cloaked in social, moral, and economic darkness, challenging the oppressive silence historically enforced upon the subaltern. Through his irreverent, confessional narrative, The White Tiger transforms storytelling into resistance—exposing exploitation while asserting identity. Adiga's novel becomes more than fiction; it is a radical gesture that destabilises dominant discourse, allowing the marginalised not only to speak, but to reclaim authorship of their own realities.*

**Keywords:** literary resistance, subaltern voice, caste and class hierarchy, rooster coop, moral ambiguity, the white tiger, animal imagery, rebellion

## Literary Resistance: A Theoretical Perspective

Literary resistance refers to the use of literature as a powerful tool to challenge, subvert, and critique dominant ideologies, oppressive systems, and colonial or authoritarian power structures. It serves as a form of cultural and political expression that gives voice to the marginalised, the silenced, and the oppressed.

The term “resistance literature” was popularised by literary scholar Barbara Harlow in her seminal 1987 work, *Resistance Literature*. Drawing inspiration from Palestinian writer Ghassan

Kanafani, Harlow argued that literature could function as a form of political activism, particularly in contexts of colonialism, occupation, and exile. She emphasised that resistance literature is not defined solely by its content, but by its function—mobilising readers, preserving collective memory, and asserting cultural and political identity (Harlow).

In postcolonial studies, literary resistance occupies a central role. Writers from formerly colonised nations often use fiction, poetry, and drama to reclaim their histories, languages, and cultural narratives. Thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi Bhabha have



explored how literature resists cultural imperialism through strategies like hybridity, mimicry, and strategic essentialism.

The Subaltern Studies movement further expands this framework by focusing on voices excluded from dominant historical narratives. Writers like Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and Arundhati Roy use literature to expose and resist these layered oppressions. Formally, resistance literature often breaks with conventional narrative structures. It embraces experimental forms, oral storytelling, multilingualism, and non-linear timelines to disrupt dominant literary traditions and reflect alternative worldviews. In essence, theorising literary resistance involves understanding literature not merely as art, but as a battleground for ideas, identities, and justice.

### **Resistance Literature in India: A Historical Overview**

India has a rich and diverse tradition of resistance literature, spanning from the colonial era to contemporary movements. Indian writers have long used literature as a form of protest, critique, and social transformation.

During the colonial period, texts like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* (1882), which includes the iconic song *Vande Mataram*, became symbols of anti-colonial nationalism. While the novel has been critiqued for its casteist undertones, it played a pivotal role in galvanising resistance against British rule.

Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909) stands as a foundational text of nonviolent resistance. In it, Gandhi critiques modern civilisation and advocates for self-rule rooted in indigenous values and ethical living. Similarly, Bhagat Singh's essay *Why I Am an Atheist* offers a powerful challenge to both religious orthodoxy and colonial oppression, written by a revolutionary who became a martyr for Indian independence.

In post-independence India, resistance literature continued to evolve, particularly through the voices of Dalit writers. Authors like Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, and Bama have used literature to

resist caste oppression and assert Dalit identity. Bama's *Karukku*, a landmark autobiographical novel, critiques caste and gender discrimination within both the Church and broader Indian society.

Mahasweta Devi's short story *Draupadi* offers a fierce critique of state violence and tribal exploitation. Centred on a tribal woman who resists military oppression with her body and voice, the story is a powerful example of feminist and subaltern resistance. In contemporary India, Arundhati Roy's fiction and nonfiction writings continue this legacy.

### **Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a Work of Literary Resistance**

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* stands as a compelling work of literary resistance, using sharp symbolism—most notably the figure of the white tiger itself—to critique systemic oppression, entrenched class hierarchies, and the illusion of democratic equality in postcolonial India. At the heart of the novel is Balram Halwai, a character born into the "Darkness" of rural poverty and caste-based subjugation. His transformation into a successful entrepreneur is not framed as a conventional rags-to-riches tale, but as a radical act of rebellion against a deeply unjust social order.

### **Rarity and Individuality: The White Tiger as a Singular Force**

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga crafts Balram Halwai as a symbol of exceptionalism within a rigidly stratified society. The metaphor of the white tiger—a rare and majestic creature that appears only once in a generation—encapsulates Balram's defiance of the social order that confines millions to lives of servitude and silence.

Balram is born into the "Darkness," a metaphorical space representing India's underclass, where poverty, caste, and illiteracy dictate one's destiny. Yet, unlike others trapped in the "Rooster Coop"—a powerful image Adiga uses to describe the psychological and cultural conditioning that keeps the oppressed complicit in their own subjugation—Balram dares to imagine a different life. His journey from a village



teashop worker to a Bangalore entrepreneur is not just a tale of ambition; it is an act of rebellion against a system designed to keep people like him invisible and voiceless.

This sense of uniqueness is explicitly acknowledged in the novel when a school inspector tells Balram:

You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation?

*“The white tiger.”*

*“That’s what you are, in this jungle.”*

*(Adiga 30)*

This moment is pivotal—it marks the first time Balram is recognised as someone who might transcend his circumstances. The white tiger becomes a symbol not only of his intelligence and cunning but also of his moral ambiguity. His eventual rise involves betrayal and murder, yet the novel frames these acts as necessary ruptures in a corrupt system that offers no ethical path to liberation.

Balram’s individuality is thus not celebrated in a vacuum; it is forged in resistance. He is not merely a product of ambition but of desperation, rage, and a refusal to be caged. His rarity lies in his willingness to see the bars of the coop—and to break them.

### **Subaltern Voice: Speaking from the Darkness**

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is a compelling example of postcolonial resistance literature that foregrounds the voice of the subaltern—those marginalised by caste, class, and colonial legacies. Through the character of Balram Halwai, Adiga gives narrative agency to someone from the “India of Darkness,” a metaphor for the underclass that remains invisible in mainstream discourse.

In postcolonial theory, particularly in the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the subaltern is someone who cannot speak—not because they are mute, but because their voice is systematically excluded from structures of power and representation. Adiga challenges this silencing by making Balram not only the narrator but the sole

voice of the novel. His story is told in the form of letters to the Chinese Premier, a narrative device that underscores both his marginality and his audacity to speak across global hierarchies.

As scholar Sankha Maji notes: “Balram serves as the mouthpiece of the subaltern people who have never been allowed to speak. Balram speaks and gives voice to the voiceless through his act of self-actualisation” (Maji 351).

Balram’s narration is raw, ironic, and unapologetically honest. He exposes the hypocrisy of India’s democratic and capitalist ideals, revealing how the poor are trapped in a cycle of servitude and silence. His transformation—from Munna, the nameless boy, to Balram, the servant, to Ashok Sharma, the entrepreneur—is not just a personal journey but a symbolic act of reclaiming identity and voice.

A pivotal moment in the novel captures this assertion of voice: “I am tomorrow” (*Adiga*276). This declaration is more than ambition—it is a radical statement of subaltern emergence. Balram is not just telling his story; he is rewriting the narrative of who gets to speak and who gets to be heard in modern India.

### **Animal Imagery and Social Commentary: Dehumanisation and Defiance**

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is saturated with animal imagery that serves as a biting critique of India’s entrenched social hierarchies and political corruption. Through metaphors like the Rooster Coop, the white tiger, and the “Animals” (landlords), Adiga exposes how the poor are dehumanised and conditioned into submission—while also highlighting the rare individual who dares to resist.

The most powerful metaphor in the novel is the Rooster Coop, which Balram uses to describe the servile mindset of India’s underclass. Like roosters in a cage awaiting slaughter, the poor are aware of their fate but remain passive, bound by fear, loyalty, and familial obligation. The Indian economy rests heavily on the implicit faith placed in domestic workers and drivers. Adiga says, “The Rooster Coop doesn’t work because the birds are stupid. It works because the



birds see the blood and feathers of the slaughtered bird and yet they do not rebel” (Adiga 147). This chilling image underscores how systemic oppression is internalised. The poor are not just physically trapped—they are mentally caged, unable to imagine escape.

In contrast to the roosters, Balram sees himself as a white tiger—a rare, powerful, and solitary creature. This image symbolises his uniqueness and his refusal to accept the fate assigned to him by caste and class. Balram’s transformation into the white tiger is not just about economic ascent—it’s a symbolic metamorphosis from prey to predator, from servant to master. His act of murder, while morally ambiguous, is framed as a necessary rupture in a corrupt system that offers no ethical path to liberation.

Adiga also uses animal nicknames for the oppressive landlords—The Stork, The Buffalo, The Wild Boar, and The Raven—to highlight their predatory nature and moral decay. These figures exploit the labour of the poor while living in obscene luxury. The villagers break their backs to generate wealth that is devoured by their animal-like masters. This bestial imagery strips the elite of their human facade, portraying them as grotesque caricatures of greed and domination.

Balram’s visit to the zoo, where he sees a white tiger in a cage, becomes a moment of profound self-recognition: “Imagine yourself in a cage,” the sign reads. Balram reflects: “I can do it with no trouble at all” (Adiga 64). This moment encapsulates the novel’s central tension: the desire to escape the cage of poverty and servitude, and the brutal cost of doing so. Adiga’s animal imagery is not decorative—it is deeply political. It dramatises the psychological violence of inequality and the rare, feral courage it takes to break free.

### **Moral Ambiguity and Rebellion: Ethics in the Shadows**

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* presents a deeply unsettling moral landscape where traditional values are upended by the brutal realities of class, corruption, and survival. At the heart of this narrative

is Balram Halwai, a character whose rise from poverty to power is marked by betrayal, theft, and murder. Yet, the novel does not condemn him outright. Instead, it invites readers to grapple with the moral ambiguity of his rebellion and to question the ethics of resistance in a society that offers no just path to liberation.

Balram’s actions—especially the murder of his employer, Ashok—are undeniably criminal. But Adiga frames them within a system so corrupt and unequal that morality itself becomes a luxury of the privileged. Balram justifies his crime not as an act of evil, but as a necessary rupture in a world where the poor are expected to remain loyal even to their oppressors. The *White Tiger* portrays an India that has not only lost its traditional social structure, but also outgrown a conventional moral framework.

Balram develops his own moral logic, rooted in the belief that he is a rare creature—a *white tiger*—who must live by his own rules. He says: “The devil was once God’s sidekick until he went freelance” (Adiga 219). This darkly humorous line encapsulates Balram’s worldview: in a society where the powerful exploit without consequence, rebellion—even violent rebellion—becomes a form of self-emancipation.

Balram is fully aware of the consequences of his actions. He knows that by killing Ashok, he is likely condemning his own family to death. Yet he proceeds, believing that the sacrifice is justified by the possibility of breaking free from the “Rooster Coop”. “I am not a sentimental man. I am a self-taught entrepreneur. That’s the difference between me and those morons you see on the road” (Adiga 225). This chilling pragmatism forces readers to confront uncomfortable questions: Can morality survive in a system built on exploitation? Is rebellion still heroic when it comes at the cost of others’ lives? As Shraddha Sinha notes: “Though the protagonist Balram has moral sense, he drops it behind to become a successful and established man. He becomes corrupt to fulfill his dreams” (Sinha 3). Balram’s journey is not a celebration of crime, but a critique of a society that leaves the poor with no ethical options. His rebellion is both a personal triumph and a moral tragedy.



## Conclusion

The white tiger, as a symbol, transcends its literal rarity to represent a rupture in hegemonic discourse. It becomes a metaphor for subaltern resistance, a challenge to what Gayatri Spivak famously called the “epistemic violence” (Spivak 271) that renders the oppressed inaudible. In giving Balram the power to narrate his own story, Adiga enacts what postcolonial theorists like Edward Said and Homi Bhabha advocate: a shift in discursive focus from the hegemonic centre to the marginalised periphery. By centring the narrative on Balram Halwai, *The White Tiger* embodies the subaltern’s quest for agency and reclaims voice amidst India’s entrenched caste, class, and capitalist hierarchies. It forces readers to confront the cost of freedom in a world where justice is not equally distributed. Thus, *The White Tiger* is not merely a novel of social mobility; it is a text of insurgency, where narrative becomes a weapon, and storytelling itself becomes an act of resistance. Adiga thus advances the project of postcolonial literary resistance by exposing and disrupting dominant power structures, and reimagining who has the right to speak.

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