

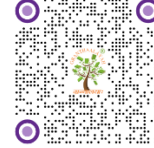


Original Article

DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER: A CRITICAL STUDY THROUGH DR. B. R. AMBEDKAR'S CRITIQUE OF CASTE DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

The present research study investigates the theme of deprivation of liberty in Aravind Adiga's well-known novel *The White Tiger* (2008) from the perspective of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste democracy. It is commonly considered that the novel is just about class struggle, entrepreneurship, and individual mobility. In fact, it is an insightful commentary on the social injustices of postcolonial democratic India that result from the persistence of caste-based hierarchies. Ambedkar's conception of caste as a system of graded inequality, the worthlessness of political democracy without social democracy, and the refusal of individual freedom in caste society offer a powerful tool to interpret the evolution of Balram Halwai from enslavement to conditional liberty. This research, by pointing out caste not as an outdated phenomenon but as a structure of power control, discovers that Balram's freedom is not liberation in the Ambedkarite sense but a re-enactment of the relations of power. His shifting from village to city, from servant to master does not break down the caste structures but rather allows him to become part of its framework. The paper asserts that the deprivation of freedom in *The White Tiger* is the consequence of the system, which is the caste democracy, and therefore it cannot be solved a person by acts of defiance.

Keywords: Dr. Ambedkar, Caste Democracy, Liberty, The White Tiger, Social Hierarchy, Caste Oppression

INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) is a crucial piece of contemporary Indian fiction, which reveals the contradiction of present India: how India can have an impressive economic growth along with rooted social inequalities. With the setting of rapidly globalizing country, the novel narrates the story of Balram Halwai, a poor villager from the lower caste, who by killing his rich upper class master, who manages to leap from the position of a servant to that of an entrepreneur. The novel exposes the gap between the quite lofty ideals of freedom that are promised by the democratic framework and the lived reality where the subaltern communities are trapped in grip of oppressed caste-based system.

The deprivation of liberty that is described in the narrative can be efficiently analyzed through Dr. Ambedkar's critique of democracy and caste. Ambedkar, in his path-breaking works like *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *States and Minorities* (1947) argues that caste is not merely a hierarchical social order but is a structure of graded inequality that refuses dignity, agency, and liberty to the subaltern communities. He further insists that political democracy cannot be genuine unless it co-exists with economic and social democracy. In a caste based society, freedom is certainly not a right which all are entitled to, but a privilege that only a

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few can enjoy. This particularly interprets the situation of Balram Halwai, whose existence is like a circle, which follows the caste structure from his birth to so-called liberation.

The present study is an attempt to demonstrate how Adiga's *The White Tiger* assists to comprehend the point to which Ambedkar was right in identifying the conflict between India's political ideals and social reality which is dramatized in the novel. The paper investigates how caste democracy deprives the liberty of people like Balram through social hierarchy, economic exploitation, familial control, and psychological internalization and how his freedom limited by the same caste structure.

AMBEDKAR'S CONCEPT OF CASTE, DEMOCRACY, AND LIBERTY

In his critique of caste system, Dr. Ambedkar, initially, concedes that the caste system is not merely a way of dividing people socially but it is a structure of producing graded inequalities. The caste based social stratification unlike other class structure divides people not on the ground of their birth but categorizes them according to fixed birth-based groups and assigns different rights, duties, and dignities to them. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar states that Caste is not a tangible barrier like a brick wall or barbed wire that physically separates Hindus and can be dismantled. Rather, it exists as an idea—an ingrained mental condition and a way of thinking. [Ambedkar \(1947\)](#).

The caste based social order, which is mentally accepted, is maintained even when there is no obvious physical force. Liberty is restricted not just through the exploitation of the economy but also through the acceptance of social inferiority by people themselves.

In addition, Ambedkar cautioned that democracy in India is merely a superficial layer imposed upon a society whose underlying structure remains fundamentally undemocratic. [Ambedkar, B. R. \(1979–1995\)](#). The legal and political tools may provide liberty, equality and fraternity but caste society denies these in the actual world. According to Ambedkar, liberty cannot be divided: it is impossible for it to have a real meaning if only some people have it. Democracy in that case is a farce if one's caste decides one's profession, social mobility, and dignity.

This theoretical framework is a perfectly applicable for the world of *The White Tiger*. The story of Balram is not just about the class struggle but the caste society in which he lived that was the primary determinative factor of his freedom. The fact that Balram's last name is "Halwai" indicates that he is from the sweet-maker caste - the detail which functions as the social scripting.

CASTE AS THE CAUSE OF STRUCTURAL POVERTY IN LAXMANGARH

The story opens in Laxmangarh, a village where the landlords such as "The Stork," "The Buffalo," and "The Wild Boar" predominate the rural life. These characters become controller not only of the economy but also of the village's social life. Balram's family is victim of poverty, illiteracy, and caste-stigma. Besides poverty, his education is also hampered by the reality that the caste system expects that the people of lower castes should serve upper castes and not compete with them.

It reflects the words of Ambedkar, who said that a caste-based society is characterized by "fixing the occupation of each class and closing all avenues of mobility" [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#). After all, the caste structure does not permit Balram to think as anything but a servant even if he obtains some education. His freedom is taken away by social structures, even before he can recognize or voice the desire for it.

Moreover, Ambedkar explained that the caste system sustains itself through social norms, endogamy, and family control. The grandmother of Balram is a perfect example of this mechanism. She does not promote his education. Instead, she drags him back into the family business by organizing a marriage and taking from him the work. Ambedkar notably recognized the family as one of the most influential mechanisms that support caste. This is the main institution through which endogamy and the adherence to caste duties are enforced. [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#).

Thus, Balram's deprivation of freedom is not the consequence of the landlord or the state, but that of the caste structure of his society which has been passed down to him by birth. Actually, his dreams are limited from his birth, long before the day he comes across the big city.

CASTE AND ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE IN DELHI

When Balram becomes a driver for Ashok in Delhi, he enters a space which is more urban and modern but caste also follows him in this new place. Though his master speaks about liberalism, entrepreneurship and globalization, but master-servant relations remains markedly caste based. Even if the interracial situation is changed, Balram is still the most oppressed person. Thus, the consciousness of the caste system permeates his interaction with the others. It also permeates his nature. Even the tiniest details of his inner world are most probably of caste origin.

Ambedkar criticizing caste wrote that it is one of the main reasons for the demolition of the principle of fraternity, i.e. mutual respect necessary for democracy to flourish. He argued that caste has eroded collective spirit, undermined social concern for others, and rendered the formation of genuine public opinion impossible [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#). Although Ashok behaves benevolently, both are unequal with respect to power, which is absolute. Balram as the low caste servant of the household is socially placed outside the

sphere of morality and hence cannot speak on equal terms of community. The explicit the "rooster coop" metaphor in the novel serves the intent of revealing the phenomenon that the lower caste communities admit their position in social order. In which, they are oppressed and this condition is normal for them which in turn leads to the internalization of humiliation.

With the economic dependence, the situation gets worsened. The salary of Balram is insufficient and to a large extent he has to send money to his family in village. The living place, his mobility, and even his status as a person can all be under the control of this powerful and rich man. He is fortunate to have a henchman like Balram by his side. When Pinky Madam, Ashok's wife kills a child, the man already in the lowest position of the caste-class hierarchy is showing how these can render him so disposed by signing a confession. Ambedkar always warned about the fact that without economic equality, freedom would still be only a privilege of a few. He even emphasized that political rights without social power have no use to the oppressed.

INTERNALIZATION OF CASTE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL BURDEN

Ambedkar's most penetrating idea was that caste system not only affects people externally but also, it goes deep and shapes the individuals' consciousness. He observed that intermarriage is the only genuine solution for dismantling caste, as no other measure can effectively dissolve it. [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#).

The implication here is that caste is primarily a psychologically and sociologically constructed system besides being one economically or politically. In the novel *The White Tiger*, Balram is persistently under the impression of being socially inferior, and even ridicules himself by calling "half-baked," a servant who must bow. If his masters were to supervise his conduct, he would regulate his behavior in better ways. He conceals his teeth, lowers his gaze, and performs naturally as an honest servant.

The idea of internally imposed inferiority is closely related to the concept which Ambedkar referred to as "the complete denial of liberty in the spiritual and intellectual sphere" [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#). For Ambedkar, liberty is much more than just the physical ability of free movement; it is the very power to think and express independently and to be able to act with one's dignity intact. Inability of Balram to recognize himself as equal to Ashok's status is quite enough to be considered as a deprivation of liberty just like that of a legal or economic restraint.

Thus, the figurative usage of the term rooster coop serves not only as a metaphor of external control but also internal psychological imprisonment. Before confronting the social one, Balram has to break this mental prison.

BREAKING THE CAGE: AMBEDKAR AND QUESTION OF EMANCIPATION

After the Balram kills Ashok and flees to Bangalore, it looks like an act of freedom. However, Ambedkar's perspective demands a deeper analysis. Ambedkar did not support the idea that an individual rebel could bring down the caste system. In his book *Annihilation of Caste*, he wrote:

"Caste is a notion; and to destroy it, you must destroy the notion. If not, you may kill the man who embodies caste, but not caste itself" [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#).

Without a doubt, Balram's violent behavior takes the life of one man. However, it does not change the societal structure that both people came from. His new name "Ashok Sharma" is a manifestation of the use of the upper-caste stereotype, not the abolition of the caste hierarchy. Although he starts a business, by the means of the local drivers, he is still exploiting them in the same way he was exploited. Instead of bringing down the system, he becomes a member of it from a higher position.

According to Ambedkar, real freedom is only achievable when there is a complete transformation of social structure—not an individual escape. Only a political and social revolution, not a personal rise, can wipe out the caste system. Balram's story shows the contrary. He in fact becomes one of the agents of caste democracy, where despite the use of the language of liberation, the oppression continues unabated.

CASTE DEMOCRACY AND THE ILLUSION OF EQUALITY

As it turned out, India is a caste democracy as Ambedkar had foreseen where along with formal political rights there exists persistent social hierarchy. For instance, Balram has the right to vote, to move, and to work. However, these rights are controlled by caste-based factors. So, in practice, he is not able to enjoy the rights on equal terms with upper-caste citizens.

Ambedkar cautioned that political democracy must be supported by social democracy, because without a foundation of social equality, political democracy cannot endure. [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#).

The White Tiger is a literary warning of this kind. The novel depicts Indian nation as a democratic society where social democracy does not exist. Although elections take place in villages, they are under the control of landlords. In the town, the police and bureaucracy serve the wealthy; oppress the poor and the powerless. Balram's rights under the law are just formalities. His post-accident confession is indicative of the reality where the law protects powerful and takes punitive measures against the poor.

This is not a democratic system in Ambedkar's sense. Rather, it is a caste democracy, a democratic structure that not only preserves the caste hierarchy but also reinforces it. In such a system, liberty is asymmetrical and follows caste lines.

LIBERTY AND THE REPRODUCTION OF CASTE POWER

After all, even when Balram turns into a businessman in Bengaluru, he is still caught in caste democracy. His drivers get same treatment once he used to get. To get around state institutions, he pays bribes thereby imitating the power structure that he has just escaped. According to Ambedkar's framework, this is not freedom but a mere integration into the system.

Ambedkar insisted that real liberty is only possible with fraternity—the recognition of every human being as equal in dignity. However, in *The White Tiger*, fraternity doesn't show up. Balram does not consider his drivers as equals but rather as his subordinates. His liberty is based on their lack of it. This is in line with what Ambedkar observed:

“The assertion by one man of his right to liberty brings him in conflict with another man's desire to dominate him. The liberty of the few is incompatible with the liberty of the many” [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#).

Therefore, the rise of Balram is not against caste oppression but rather shows its ability to adapt. Caste democracy has the individual as the vehicle of mobility but not the collective one of emancipation. The one lower-caste man may be elevated but the structure remains the same.

AMBEDKARITE LIBERTY VS. NEOLIBERAL FREEDOM

Ambedkar considered liberty as a collective, systemic change that is rooted in social equality, economic justice, and fraternity. Whereas, the novel presents a neoliberal version of liberty: the concept that individuals can pull themselves out of poverty and oppression by means of personal ambition and taking a risk.

Balram is the perfect example of such a neoliberal model. After murdering Ashok, the establishing a business, and changing lifestyle in Bengaluru, he glorifies his 'freedom'. However, according to Ambedkar, this is not freedom, as it does not abolish the caste system. In fact, Ambedkar asserted that real freedom has to come with the abolition of caste and the provision of equal dignity and opportunity.

Balram's success as a businessman is not enough to free people from the rooster coop. It only creates another Ashok as a new power figure. The conflict between individual mobility and structural injustice is, thus, at the core of the contradiction of the caste democracy.

CONCLUSION

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is typically interpreted as a narrative of revolt. However, with the help of the perspective of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, it presents itself as a story of liberty denied and deferred. Balram's experience exposes the ways in which caste democracy turns democratic rights into privileges, liberty into deception, and social mobility into assimilation. The reality that Balram position as an entrepreneur is not the emancipation's peak but rather the proof of existence of the caste power.

Within Ambedkar's critical framework, Balram's killing of Ashok should not be seen as the destruction of the caste order. Rather, it marks the moment when Balram is allowed to occupy a slightly higher position within the same hierarchical structure. The new drivers that he hires are still in the same rooster coop. For Ambedkar, liberty would have meant dismantling the entire system rather than merely replacing one master with another.

Therefore, the deprivation of liberty in *The White Tiger* is by neither chance nor temporary; it is deeply rooted in caste-based society. It has its origin in caste democracy. As Ambedkar stated clearly that democracy is not merely a system of governance, rather, it is a way of living together. It is shaped by shared experiences and communication, and grounded in mutual respect and regard for one another. [Ambedkar \(2014\)](#).

In a society where caste refuses respect to other, freedom has not been realized. When Adiga's novel is read through Ambedkar's perspective, it is not just the story of one man's revolt. More importantly, it strongly condemns the caste system that denies real freedom to the masses.

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