

Ambition and Moral Transgression in Neoliberal India: Ethical Paradoxes in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract: Ambition in postcolonial societies is complex because it is shaped by poverty, inequality, and historical oppression rather than individual desire alone. The paper argues that in postcolonial fiction, ambition becomes an ethical dilemma because people living in unequal societies often have to make morally questionable choices to improve their lives. In *The White Tiger*, by Aravind Adiga, the protagonist, Balram Halwai, who rises from a poor village servant to a successful businessman in urban India, achieves his success at a great moral cost, including murdering his employer, stealing money, and betraying the trust of the family he serves. The study indicates a moral grey area in which inequality blurs the distinction between victim and perpetrator. His success is both an act of resistance against an unjust social order and a demonstration of the ethical compromises that such a system can demand.

The "Rooster Coop" (147) is one of the novel's most important metaphor where chickens in a market watch other chickens being slaughtered but do not try to escape. They remain trapped because they have been conditioned to obey. Similarly, Balram Halwai explains that poor people in India are trapped in a "Rooster Coop" because of conditions like poverty, caste discrimination, fear, loyalty to their families, dependence on their wealthy employers and all. This metaphor represents psychological imprisonment and economic imprisonment which people believe they cannot escape. The paper argues that Aravind Adiga does not present Balram as a perfect hero. Instead, Adiga shows that success in modern India often comes with serious ethical compromises. He shows that in a society shaped by caste inequality, corruption, and ruthless capitalism, success itself becomes ethically unstable. The novel encourages readers to question whether genuine freedom is possible when achieving it requires adopting the values and practices of the very system one seeks to escape. The paper argues that Balram's story demonstrates that ambition in contemporary India is deeply shaped by social inequality and economic pressures. His rise from poverty is neither purely heroic nor purely criminal. Instead, it reflects the ethical tensions of a society where success often requires difficult moral compromises. By treating ambition as a complex and contested moral issue, the study offers a deeper understanding of how contemporary Indian fiction explores the relationship between personal success, justice, and structural inequality.

Keywords: Ambition; Capitalism; Ethical Delima; moral gray area; psychological imprisonment; moral compromises; Postcolonial Fiction; structural inequality.

Introduction: Throughout history, it has been viewed in contrasting ways—sometimes as a quality that inspires personal growth and achievement, and at other times as a force that encourages greed, pride, and moral decline. While thinkers such as Aristotle cautioned against unchecked ambition, others, including

Nietzsche, regarded the pursuit of self-realization and individual excellence as a positive human drive. These opposing perspectives highlight the ethical complexity of ambition. In postcolonial societies, the meaning of ambition becomes even more complicated. Persistent inequalities rooted in caste, class, colonial legacies, and systemic corruption often restrict opportunities for social advancement. Under such conditions, ambition is no longer simply a personal choice or admirable aspiration; it frequently becomes a means of survival in an environment where legitimate paths to success are limited. This moral tension forms the backdrop of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), where the life of Balram Halwai illustrates the difficult choice individuals may confront while attempting to escape poverty and social oppression.

Awarded the Man Booker Prize, *The White Tiger* is written as a series of confessional letters in which Balram Halwai reflects on his transformation from an impoverished village servant living in India's "Darkness" to a prosperous entrepreneur in Bangalore. His rise, however, is far from a conventional success story. It is achieved through the murder of his employer, Ashok, a crime that Balram presents as the only possible means of escaping a deeply oppressive social order. By tracing this journey, Adiga invites readers to consider a difficult moral question: is it possible to attain social and economic advancement within an unjust system without compromising one's ethical values?

One of the novel's most significant symbols is the "Rooster Coop," (147) which represents more than material exploitation. It illustrates the psychological control that keeps the poor trapped in cycles of obedience, compelling them to prioritize family obligations and social expectations over their own freedom. Balram argues that breaking out of this "Coop" requires an individual to sever even the strongest familial ties, exposing the profound moral costs imposed by structural inequality. Consequently, ambition is portrayed as both an act of resistance against oppressive social structures and a force capable of generating new forms of domination. Although it enables Balram to escape his subordinate position, it also leads him to adopt many of the exploitative practices that he once condemned.

This study contends that *The White Tiger* presents ambition as far more than a simple act of resistance against social oppression. Instead, Adiga portrays it as a morally ambiguous force shaped by the realities of neoliberal capitalism. Balram's transformation reflects a profound ethical contradiction: although his violent rejection of servitude enables him to escape a life of exploitation, his later success as an entrepreneur ultimately draws him into the very systems of power and exploitation that he once opposed. As a result, the novel suggests that ambition functions not merely as a path to freedom but as a survival strategy that demands significant ethical compromise.

Drawing on the perspectives of virtue ethics, utilitarianism, and postcolonial theory, this paper examines how Balram's character embodies the moral contradictions of contemporary Indian society. His journey demonstrates that social liberation may be achieved through violence, economic advancement may depend upon ethical sacrifice, and personal mobility can come at the expense of moral integrity. Through this complex portrayal, Adiga questions the celebratory narratives surrounding neoliberal success and encourages readers to critically examine the ethical costs of aspiration in societies marked by deep social and economic inequalities.

Literature Review: Scholarly discussions of *The White Tiger* have predominantly focused on its exploration of social mobility, neoliberal economic reforms, subaltern identity, and the ethical dilemmas that characterize post-liberalization India. Following its publication and its recognition with the Booker Prize, the novel has attracted considerable attention from critics working in postcolonial studies, literary ethics, and contemporary Indian literature in English. Much of the early scholarship interprets Balram Halwai as a representative of the subaltern who challenges entrenched systems of caste and class. For example, Sharma (2010) argues that Balram's first-person narrative gives expression to a suppressed subaltern consciousness, transforming his personal story into a broader critique of social oppression. Likewise, Kumar (2012) views ambition in the novel as a response to the limited opportunities available

within a deeply hierarchical society, maintaining that Balram's decision to commit murder cannot be separated from the structural forms of violence and exploitation that shape his life. From these perspectives, Balram emerges not merely as an individual offender but as someone whose actions are deeply conditioned by systemic inequality and institutional injustice.

In contrast, several critics offer a more critical interpretation of *The White Tiger*, questioning whether Balram's success represents genuine liberation. Chakravarty (2011) argues that the novel captures the moral contradictions of neoliberal India, suggesting that economic liberalisation has deepened ethical uncertainty instead of eliminating entrenched social inequalities. From this viewpoint, Balram's rise should not be understood as a radical challenge to existing power structures; rather, it reflects his incorporation into the competitive values and profit-driven logic of neoliberal capitalism. Echoing this perspective, Mehrotra (2015) maintains that Balram's emergence as a successful entrepreneur ultimately reproduces the same patterns of domination and exploitation that he initially sought to escape. His social mobility, therefore, illustrates how capitalist systems can absorb and replicate resistance rather than dismantle oppressive hierarchies.

The novel's recurring image of the "Rooster Coop"(147) has also received significant scholarly attention. Mukherjee (2013) interprets the metaphor primarily as a form of psychological domination, arguing that the persistence of social hierarchy depends not only on economic deprivation but also on the internalisation of obedience and submission. This interpretation resonates with postcolonial theory, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*(271), which contends that systems of domination are maintained through ideological conditioning as well as material power. Viewed in this light, Balram's confessional narrative—addressed to the Chinese Premier—extends beyond a personal testimony of oppression. It simultaneously functions as a performance of entrepreneurial success, complicating his position as a subaltern speaker by turning his story of survival into a narrative of self-promotion within the very capitalist framework he critiques.

Scholars have also approached *The White Tiger* through the lens of global capitalism, arguing that Adiga places Balram's transformation within the broader discourse of "New India."(35) In this vision of economic progress, stories of individual success are often celebrated as evidence of equal opportunity, even as enduring inequalities of caste, class, and wealth remain concealed. Against this backdrop, ambition is closely linked to the neoliberal ideal of self-reinvention. Balram's decision to adopt the name "Ashok Sharma" (276) signifies more than an improvement in social status; it reflects the extent to which identity itself becomes a marketable construct shaped by economic aspiration and capitalist values.

The ethical dimensions of Balram's journey have likewise generated divergent critical responses. Some scholars employ a utilitarian framework, suggesting that the murder of Ashok can be understood as a morally defensible act within a deeply corrupt social order because it enables liberation from systemic oppression. Others adopt a deontological perspective, maintaining that no degree of social injustice can excuse the violation of fundamental moral principles. Although these interpretations acknowledge the novel's ethical complexity, they frequently examine morality in isolation from its postcolonial context or interpret ambition chiefly as an individual psychological impulse. Such approaches often overlook the extent to which ambition in the novel is produced and shaped by wider social, political, and economic structures rather than by personal desire alone.

Within the history of Western philosophy, ambition has been understood as a morally complex and often disputed concept. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that ethical excellence depends upon moderation, warning that excessive desire can undermine virtuous conduct and lead individuals away from the moral mean. By contrast, Friedrich Nietzsche presents ambition in a more affirmative light, associating the pursuit of self-realization and the will to power with creativity, strength, and human flourishing. Later developments in moral philosophy further deepen this debate. Deontological ethics evaluates actions

according to universal moral duties and principles, whereas utilitarianism assesses their ethical value in terms of their consequences and the overall good they produce. These contrasting philosophical perspectives offer a valuable framework for understanding Balram's journey as a complex moral conflict rather than a straightforward account of personal achievement.

From a postcolonial perspective, ambition acquires additional layers of meaning because it is shaped by histories of domination, inequality, and cultural negotiation. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity explains how individuals situated on the social margins construct their identities within spaces of contradiction, where acts of resistance frequently coexist with the adoption of dominant social values. Balram's transformation reflects precisely this tension. Although he rejects the restrictions imposed by caste and challenges established social hierarchies, his eventual success depends upon embracing the competitive and exploitative practices of neoliberal capitalism. His rise, therefore, cannot be understood solely as either liberation or moral failure; instead, it reveals the complex ways in which resistance remains intertwined with the structures of power from which it seeks to break free.

Despite the breadth of existing critical work, several limitations can still be identified. First, a considerable portion of scholarship tends to examine caste, race, capitalism, and ethics as discrete categories of analysis, rather than understanding them as interrelated and mutually constitutive forces. Second, discussions of Balram's moral status often fall into simplified oppositions of approval and condemnation, without fully accounting for the ways neoliberal contexts complicate and destabilize inherited ethical frameworks. Third, although ambition is widely recognized as a central theme in the novel, it is rarely theorized in depth as a structural and philosophical concept shaped by global capitalism as well as entrenched social hierarchies.

In response to these gaps, this study integrates perspectives from literary ethics, postcolonial theory, and critiques of neoliberal capitalism to conceptualize ambition as an inherently paradoxical ethical force. Instead of framing Balram's character in terms of heroism or villainy, it investigates how ambition itself becomes morally ambiguous in a context where survival is closely tied to forms of corruption and structural inequality. Through this approach, *The White Tiger* is read not only as a work of social critique but also as an extended reflection on the moral economy of aspiration in contemporary Indian society.

Theoretical Framework: This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates literary ethics, postcolonial theory, and critiques of neoliberal capitalism to explore ambition as an ethically complex and unstable force in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. The analysis begins with the perspective of virtue ethics, drawing particularly on Aristotle's understanding of moral character and the principle of moderation. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that virtue lies in maintaining a balance between excess and deficiency, suggesting that unrestrained desire disrupts moral harmony. Viewed through this framework, Balram's ambition emerges not as a healthy or measured pursuit of success but as an excessive response to persistent poverty, exploitation, and social humiliation. His determination to escape oppression gradually exceeds the limits of moral restraint and ultimately leads him to commit acts of transgression. This reading raises a broader ethical question: can moral virtue genuinely exist within social systems that are structured around inequality and injustice?

The study also incorporates utilitarian ethics, focusing on the idea that an action may be considered morally acceptable if it produces a greater overall good. Balram interprets his decision to commit murder through this consequentialist perspective, presenting it as an unavoidable step toward freedom from oppression and exploitation. Yet the novel complicates this justification by showing that, after achieving economic success, Balram adopts many of the same exploitative practices that once victimized him. In doing so, *The White Tiger* questions the ethical validity of using individual acts of violence as a means of

challenging systemic injustice, suggesting that such actions often reinforce rather than dismantle oppressive structures.

In addition, the analysis draws on postcolonial theory to examine ambition through the lenses of subaltern agency and ambivalence. The novel's "Rooster Coop"(148) metaphor reflects postcolonial critiques of internalized domination, illustrating how systems of power are sustained not only through economic inequality but also through psychological control. Balram's escape from this condition can therefore be understood in two contrasting ways: as an act of resistance by a subaltern figure and as a process of assimilation into the very capitalist system he seeks to overcome. His rise as a successful entrepreneur exemplifies what postcolonial theorists describe as mimicry, where resistance to dominant power simultaneously reproduces its values and mechanisms. The theoretical framework further incorporates critiques of neoliberal capitalism, which question the tendency to celebrate individual achievement while overlooking the structural inequalities that shape opportunities. From a neoliberal perspective, ambition is often portrayed as evidence of personal determination and self-made success. In *The White Tiger*, however, Balram's ambition develops not from genuine freedom of choice but from the pressures of poverty, social exclusion, and exploitation. Although he reconstructs himself as a successful entrepreneur, reflecting the neoliberal ideal of self-fashioning, the ethical compromises that accompany his rise complicate optimistic narratives surrounding India's economic liberalisation after 1991.

By bringing together insights from literary ethics, postcolonial theory, utilitarian thought, and critiques of neoliberal capitalism, this study examines ambition as more than an individual psychological characteristic. Instead, it understands ambition as an ethical dilemma produced by broader social and historical forces, where caste hierarchies, capitalist structures, and the contradictions of postcolonial modernity collectively shape both individual choices and their moral consequences.

Research Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis. It relies on an in-depth interpretative reading of *The White Tiger*, examining how narrative voice, symbolism, characterization, and thematic elements contribute to the novel's exploration of ambition, morality, and social mobility. The textual analysis is organized around three central areas of inquiry:

1. The depiction of systemic oppression through the "Rooster Coop" metaphor.
2. The moral justification of murder as a means of achieving freedom from exploitation.
3. The evolution of the subaltern protagonist into an entrepreneurial figure, highlighting the reconstruction of identity within a capitalist framework.

To strengthen the analysis, the study draws on a range of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, works on literary ethics, and scholarship addressing postcolonial capitalism. These sources provide the broader theoretical context necessary for interpreting the novel's ethical and socio-political dimensions. Rather than applying theory as a rigid external framework, the research develops an integrated approach in which theoretical perspectives and close textual analysis inform one another, resulting in a coherent and well-supported interpretation.

Ambition and Structural Violence: The Rooster Coop as Moral Entrapment: In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga portrays ambition not as a purely individual psychological impulse but as a response shaped by entrenched systems of social oppression. The "Rooster Coop"(147) serves as the novel's most powerful metaphor for illustrating this condition of structural confinement. More than a symbol of economic exploitation, it represents a deeply internalized culture of submission reinforced by caste divisions, family responsibilities, and pervasive institutional corruption. Through this metaphor, Adiga demonstrates how oppressive social structures are sustained not only by material inequalities but also by patterns of obedience that become psychologically embedded in those subjected to them. Balram's childhood in the village of *Laxmangarh* illustrates a condition of deeply rooted social immobility inherited

through caste and poverty. From an early age, he is deprived of educational opportunities, forced into child labor, and socialized to view a life of servitude as inevitable. The "Darkness," a term Balram repeatedly uses to describe rural India, extends beyond a physical location to represent a state of social and intellectual confinement where hope for advancement is systematically suppressed. Within this environment, ambition cannot be understood as the balanced pursuit of excellence envisioned in Aristotelian virtue ethics. Instead, it develops as an intensified reaction to persistent experiences of deprivation, marginalization, and humiliation, shaped by conditions that leave little room for ethical moderation.

The "Rooster Coop"(147) metaphor is especially important because it highlights the psychological mechanisms that sustain oppression. Balram explains that servants resemble roosters waiting to be slaughtered: they witness the fate of others in similar positions but rarely attempt to resist. Their compliance is maintained not only through fear of personal consequences but also through their deep sense of responsibility toward their families. The possibility that an individual's defiance could bring severe punishment upon relatives reinforces their loyalty to the existing social order. In this way, the novel suggests that structural violence is upheld as much through emotional obligations and social relationships as through direct force or intimidation. This perspective challenges simplistic assumptions that the subaltern remains passive by choice. Instead, the Rooster Coop represents a system of moral and psychological conditioning in which obedience is internalized and accepted as an ethical obligation rather than merely an imposed necessity.

From a postcolonial standpoint, the internalization of social hierarchy illustrates how caste continues to function as a powerful system of regulation even in post-liberalization India. While economic reforms promote the ideal of social and economic mobility, the novel demonstrates that caste and class remain decisive factors in determining who can access opportunities. As a result, Balram's desire to transcend his circumstances is marked by a fundamental contradiction. The discourse surrounding "New India" celebrates entrepreneurship and individual advancement, yet deeply entrenched inequalities continue to limit genuine social mobility. Within this context, ambition emerges as a double-edged force—an essential means of challenging oppression, but one that also carries profound ethical and personal risks.

Furthermore, Adiga depicts structural violence as an ordinary feature of everyday life rather than as a series of exceptional incidents. The Stork family's involvement in corruption, electoral malpractice, and the exploitation of their drivers is presented as an accepted aspect of the prevailing social order. Likewise, the legal system offers little possibility of justice, appearing to operate primarily in the interests of those with wealth and influence. Within such a morally compromised environment, adherence to conventional ethical principles seems increasingly unrealistic. As Balram becomes more aware of the pervasive corruption surrounding him, his confidence in moral restraint steadily weakens. His ambition is therefore shaped within a system where honesty and integrity receive no meaningful reward, while obedience serves only to perpetuate exploitation and lifelong subordination.

Significantly, the novel resists any romanticization of Balram's moment of awakening. His recognition of systemic entrapment does not translate into collective resistance; instead, it leads to a form of individual strategic calculation. Rather than attempting to dismantle the "Rooster Coop, (148)" he seeks to break free from it for himself alone. This distinction is essential, as his ambition is not framed as a revolutionary or ideological project but as a pragmatic and self-serving pursuit of escape. In this sense, structural violence produces a subject who comes to associate freedom with the acquisition of power rather than with any broader social transformation.

The recurring symbolism of light and darkness further intensifies this ethical ambiguity. The passage from "Darkness" to "Light"(14) initially appears to signify progress and upward mobility, yet the narrative consistently undermines the assumption that illumination corresponds to moral clarity. Urban centers such as Delhi and Bangalore, despite their economic dynamism, are equally permeated by corruption and moral

compromise. The "Light," therefore, does not represent ethical superiority but rather increased access to wealth and influence. Within this framework, ambition drives Balram into a world where power is redistributed rather than morally redeemed.

Through the metaphor of the "Rooster Coop," (147) Adiga illustrates that acts of structural violence exist prior to and beyond individual acts of transgression. Balram's eventual decision to commit murder cannot be separated from the oppressive system that shapes his lived reality. At the same time, the novel resists the notion that violence is simply predetermined or unavoidable. Instead, it shows how sustained exposure to systemic injustice gradually alters patterns of moral judgement and ethical reasoning. Within such conditions, ambition—formed through repeated experiences of humiliation—loses its connection to collective moral frameworks and becomes increasingly oriented toward survival and self-assertion.

This section therefore argues that ambition in *The White Tiger* is not inherently corrupt but is socially and structurally produced. However, it also acknowledges that such conditioning does not fully eliminate moral agency. Balram is able to identify the workings of the "Rooster Coop," (147) critically reflect on its logic, and ultimately choose to break away from it. The resulting tension between structural determination and individual responsibility forms the core ethical paradox that is further developed in the following section.

Murder, Moral Justification, and the Ethics of Entrepreneurial Self-Fashioning: If structural violence gives rise to ambition as a form of necessity, then the murder of Ashok represents the point at which ambition crosses into explicit moral transgression. In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga carefully presents this act not as a moment of spontaneous violence, but as a deliberate and calculated break from the existing order. Balram does not act out of immediate anger; rather, he arrives at the decision through sustained reflection, repeatedly weighing justification against consequence. The ethical significance of the novel is concentrated in this pivotal moment.

Balram interprets the murder as an act of liberation from the "Rooster Coop," (147) arguing that true escape is only possible for someone willing to accept the destruction of their family. The rhetoric of sacrifice is crucial to his reasoning. He recognizes in advance that his actions may provoke retaliatory violence against his relatives, fully aware that his personal freedom is tied to their potential suffering. This acknowledgement complicates any simplistic reading of the act as self-defense. The killing is neither accidental nor purely reactive; it is strategic and premeditated. In this sense, it functions as a deliberate rupture from the social and familial bonds that previously ensured his compliance.

From a utilitarian standpoint, Balram initially appears to justify his actions through the idea of producing a greater benefit, albeit primarily for himself. He repeatedly argues that servitude lacks moral worth and that pervasive corruption effectively closes off any legitimate route to upward mobility. His reasoning reflects a consequentialist logic: if the system is fundamentally corrupt and resistant to reform, then violent disruption seems to emerge as the only viable means of achieving change. However, the novel gradually undermines this rationale. Rather than eliminating corruption, Balram's success ultimately embeds him within the same system he once opposed. His taxi business in Bangalore depends on bribery, informal negotiations, and strategic engagement with existing power networks. In this sense, the outcomes of his actions serve individual advancement more than collective transformation, calling into question the ethical validity of his utilitarian justification.

Read through a virtue ethics lens, the ethical tension becomes even more pronounced. Aristotle's "golden mean" locates virtue in balanced moderation rather than in extremes. Balram's drive, however, moves far beyond moderation, largely because restraint has only produced degradation and shame in his experience. His moral outlook is shaped by a deep conviction that patience and honesty lead nowhere. The novel therefore suggests a condition in which traditional virtue loses practical stability. At the same

time, Adiga does not simply validate excess as a moral alternative; instead, he frames Balram's evolution as ethically conflicted—both enabling and ethically damaging.

The murder also operates as a symbolic break from paternal authority. Ashok, while more sympathetic than his family, still represents the softened image of capitalist power. He shows moments of guilt and awareness, yet remains embedded in and supportive of exploitative structures. Balram's act of killing him thus goes beyond class resistance; it also dismantles the illusion of compassionate or "liberal" domination. From a postcolonial perspective, this challenges the idea that humane treatment within unequal systems meaningfully disrupts structural injustice. Kindness, in this context, does not remove inequality—it only makes it less visible.

The novel's confessional narrative form further complicates any simple interpretation of Balram's actions as resistance. He tells his story as a self-made entrepreneur speaking to a global readership, and his voice shifts constantly between irony, self-congratulation, and justification. By adopting the name "Ashok Sharma," he effectively appropriates both his former employer's identity and the social prestige associated with upper-caste naming conventions. This renaming gestures toward upward mobility, but it also signals imitation rather than true emancipation. In this process, the subaltern figure gradually assumes the very position of authority he once rejected.

Within this framework, ambition takes on a deeply contradictory character. What initially seems like a decisive break from oppressive structures through violence ultimately leads to reintegration into the same capitalist system. Balram defends practices such as bribery and strategic compromise as unavoidable realities of doing business. At the same time, he presents himself as a more "ethical" employer, promising fairness to those who work for him, yet the underlying hierarchy of power remains unchanged. The "Rooster Coop," (147) rather than being dismantled, is effectively reproduced in a new form under his ownership.

Adiga ultimately refuses to offer any clear moral resolution. Balram does not express repentance, nor does he celebrate his actions in a straightforward way; instead, his narration is marked by irony, self-awareness, and occasional satire. This reflective tone suggests that he is conscious of the ethical contradictions embedded in his success. His lack of remorse should not be read as simple moral approval, but rather as a device that unsettles the reader and invites difficult questions. Is he a perpetrator, a hero, or merely a product of the system he inhabits? The text deliberately resists assigning him a fixed moral category.

In this sense, the murder in *The White Tiger* cannot be understood solely as either criminal wrongdoing or emancipatory violence. It becomes the point where personal agency intersects with broader structures of oppression and economic pressure. Balram's rise indicates that in a world where caste hierarchy, legal systems, and capitalist interests work in tandem against the disadvantaged, conventional moral ideals can seem unrealistic or out of reach. At the same time, the novel highlights a troubling paradox: attempts at liberation through violent means may end up reproducing the same systems of domination they seek to escape.

Consequently, ambition itself emerges as an unstable ethical force throughout the novel. It is neither purely admirable nor inherently corrupt, but becomes morally unpredictable when shaped by deep structural inequality. Balram's reinvention of himself as an entrepreneur captures this tension—standing both as evidence of adaptability and as a sign of gradual ethical disintegration.

Conclusion: The Ethical Paradox of Aspiration in Neoliberal India: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* offers a layered exploration of ambition through Balram Halwai's shift from an impoverished village servant to a successful urban businessman. Rather than presenting ambition as a simple moral flaw, the novel frames it as something shaped by systemic violence and entrenched inequality. The "Rooster Coop"

(148) metaphor captures how caste divisions, economic deprivation, and psychological conditioning confine individuals to fixed social positions, making conventional moral frameworks appear ineffective or irrelevant. In this context, Balram's growing awareness of injustice leads him toward a deliberate, individual act of rupture rather than a collective uprising, most clearly expressed through the killing of his employer. Yet his rise does not dismantle the structures of exploitation; instead, it replicates elements of the same hierarchy he seeks to escape. While neoliberal capitalism appears to open pathways for advancement, it simultaneously demands moral concessions that complicate the idea of success. The figure of the "self-made man" is therefore destabilized, revealing how upward mobility can be intertwined with ethical compromise and self-reinvention.

Ultimately, the novel raises difficult questions about morality and agency within deeply unequal systems. It suggests that although social mobility is possible, it often comes at a significant ethical cost. Balram's story becomes both an example of resilience and a warning about how ambition can be distorted under conditions of structural injustice. Adiga leaves readers confronting a persistent contradiction: aspiration is essential for survival, yet it is inseparable from moral ambiguity.

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