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UNMASKING THE NEOLIBERAL PROMISE IN INDIA: BALRAM'S PARADOXICAL REPRESENTATIVE STATUS — AND THE CLASH BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE AGENCY — IN *THE WHITE TIGER*

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Abstract:
This article reexamines Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) as a literary critique of the neoliberal promise that widespread prosperity will result from globalized, market-driven reforms. It demonstrates how the novel exposes a social order in post-liberalization India where material upward mobility for a rare few is based on increased exploitation of the majority. Balram Halwai's status as a representative character, who is portrayed in the text as both an "atypical" entrepreneurial prodigy and a "typical" working-class everyman, is at the center of this argument. The novel stages and then resolves this representational paradox through two recurrent animal metaphors: the taxonomy that designates Balram as a single "White Tiger" and the frequently self-imposed boundary that restricts his class, the "Rooster Coop". This article closely reads these two metaphors and synthesizes them to arrive at what message the novel provides through Balram's paradoxical representative status. By situating his status within the larger global economic context presented in the novel, unfolding in India through transnationally operating forces, this article argues that the amalgamation of old and new power structures in globalizing India means an inevitable collision between individual and collective agency. In order to succeed under this economic system, one must actively reproduce the systemic inequalities. Thus, this article proposes that far from being a celebration of self-made enterprise, The White Tiger is best read as challenging readers to consider whose agency is facilitated, and whose is sacrificed in a global setting that is sometimes uncritically celebrated.

Keywords: transnational literature, neoliberalism; post-liberalization India; individual vs collective agency; global Anglophone fiction

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1. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) challenges the neoliberal claim that structuring society around neoliberal ideals leads to widespread prosperity. Set in India in the 2000s, the novel demonstrates how the combination of neoliberalism and India's preexisting social structures results in further marginalization for most of the population by presenting a problematic triumph of its protagonists' agency within a transnational context, a cross-border exchange of people and forces. By doing so, it highlights how individual and communal agency are inevitably on a collision course in the rapidly globalizing India. In *The White Tiger* (*WT* from here), Balram, the central character, represents the stay-at-home postcolonial population facing the newfound possibilities a globalizing postcolonial state offers. However, in this rags-to-riches story, a contradiction lies at the heart of Balram's representative status, which is that Balram is both typical and non-typical at the same time. The following paragraphs will first show how the novel presents Balram as a representative figure. Then, by analyzing two central metaphors of the novel, this article explores how the abovementioned paradox at the heart of Balram's representative status is presented to be resolved so that the paradox critiques the uncritical adoption of the neoliberal ethos that progress would be for all Indians.

Balram, as the narrator, often signals his own representativeness, portraying himself as a typical figure within India's social and economic landscape. Balram's origin is Laxmangarh, a "*typical Indian village*" (13). He draws a direct connection between his personal journey and the broader story of Bangalore, a hub of modern Indian entrepreneurship. He offers his life story as a lens through which the Chinese Premier can understand the essence of Bangalore's entrepreneurial spirit, "*When you have heard the story of how I got to Bangalore and became one of its most successful (though probably least known) businessmen, you will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man*" (5). In positioning his personal narrative as a microcosm of broader economic trends, he establishes himself as a representative figure in modern India.

Balram's representativeness extends to his self-perception as part of India's "*half-baked*" majority. Balram's employer, Ashok, once dismissively remarks to his wife Pinky that the country is full of people like Balram, who are ignorant or "*half-baked*" (7). Balram, though embarrassed when reflecting later, agrees, "*Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked*" (8). Through this confession, Balram situates himself within the broader category of the undereducated in India. His narrative is thus both personal and collective, "*the story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced*" (8), he states, further stressing his role as a symbol of a larger societal type. Scholars discussing the novel agree, although they have gone in different directions regarding what his story represents. For example, A. J. Sebastian characterizes Balram's story as a "*parable of the new India*," wherein the dark twists of his journey, such as the murder of Ashok, serve as a metaphor for the darker undercurrents of people's aspirations (230). Similarly, Sarkar Hasan Al Zayed argues that the novel's focus on Balram's

entrepreneurial success "*allegorizes the nation's annexation into an integrated world market*" (58).

Balram's representative status is both established and complicated throughout the novel. His confession that "*a billion servants are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses*" (72) suggests a universality to his violent impulses, yet his actual commission of murder sets him apart. Similarly, his acceptance of blame for Pinky's accidental killing is both an individual and a collective act. He writes to Wen Jiabao: "*The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse*" (101). However, he ends up not getting in trouble, even after killing his master, Ashok. In this way, while Balram's representativeness is stressed in several cases, his exceptionality is even more accentuated. How can Balram be both, a typical character and an exceptional one? And how does the novel use his representative status to make comments on the globalizing India operating in a transnational context? *WT* achieves this by converging its two central metaphors, the rooster coop and the white tiger.

The Rooster Coop metaphor embodies Balram's assessment of Indian society. He uses this image to highlight the poor's entrenched servitude, comparing them to chickens trapped in a coop, resigned to fate. As Balram describes, "*The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country*" (102). For Balram, this image comprehensively covers the working class, as he observes that "*99.9 percent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market*" (103). The bleak image portrays an entire class locked in an oppressive cycle from which escape is unimaginable. Importantly, Balram's critique goes beyond the structural oppression enforced by the elites; it extends to the psychological servitude internalized by the oppressed. He claims that "*a handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent—as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way—to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse*" (103). This observation reflects the deep psychological conditioning that renders the poor not only oppressed by the wealthy but also complicit in their own oppression. The image of the Rooster Coop thus becomes a metaphor for a society where the underclass is ideologically programmed to accept its place, unable to imagine rebellion, even when it is within reach. Critics have noted the effectiveness of this metaphor in illustrating the logic of exploitation. Robbie B. H. Goh explains that this image reinforces a "*senseless but implacable logic of exploitation and victimization*" (348). Lena Khor echoes this reading, noting that the Rooster Coop illustrates how "*the butcher is profiting too much from the situation to want to alter it*," while "*the chickens are fighting too much amongst themselves to be able to change it*" (46-7), creating an inescapable dynamic of oppression.

The Coop metaphor recurs at pivotal moments in Balram's journey toward rebellion, showcasing both its power of intervention at crucial moments and Balram's exceptionality of overcoming it. As he contemplates killing Ashok and escaping with his

bribe money, Balram encounters a small yet symbolic moment of resistance by the Coop. At a train station, he receives a chit from a weight machine that reads, "*Respect for the law is the first command of the gods*." Balram reflects with bitter irony, "*Even here… they try to hoodwink us. Here, on the threshold of a man's freedom, just before he boards a train to a new life, these flashing fortune machines are the final alarm bell of the Rooster Coop… A rooster was escaping from the coop!*" (148). In this moment, Balram is acutely aware of the psychological barriers guarding against his physical escape. The system, like the coop, has its own built-in sirens to warn of escape attempts, and on the brink of freedom, Balram recognizes its strong pull. Nonetheless, his ability to see through the Coop's psychological call to respect the law and his refusal to be bound by it enable his break from the Coop. As Praveen Shetty argues, Balram's success lies in his ability to "*identify and escape the coop whenever the circumstances demanded it*" (284). While the majority of the population remains trapped, Balram's story becomes one of subversive liberation, a rare but powerful example of breaking free from the mechanisms binding the poor to perpetual servitude.

To better understand how the Coop functions, Balram suggests Mr. Jiabao should ask two questions. First, "*Why does the Rooster Coop work? How does it trap so many millions of men and women so effectively?*" (103). The second question follows logically from the first: "*Can a man break out of the coop? What if one day, for instance, a driver took his employer's money and ran? What would his life be like?*" (103). These questions are central to Balram's internal struggle, and he provides sobering answers to both. In response to the first question, Balram identifies the oppressive influence of the family as the key to the Coop's power. He explains, *"[T]he Indian family is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop*" (104). The family, traditionally seen as a source of support and protection, is here re-imagined as perpetuating poverty and servitude by discouraging rebellion and encouraging conformity. Balram narrates the same thing in his grandmother Kusum's role, who forces Balram to give up school, join a teashop, opposes him going to a driving school, and forces him to marry. As the critic Sara D. Schotland notes, Balram's insights about the family's roles explain why the poor are "*confined in their coop generation after generation*" (7). Balram's answer to the second question is even more chilling. He claims that only a man willing to see his family destroyed, "*hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters*" (104), can break out of the Coop. Such a man would not be a normal human being but a "*freak, a pervert of nature*", in Balram's words, "*It would, in fact, take a White Tiger*" (104). This declaration introduces the novel's second major metaphorical image: the White Tiger. While the Rooster Coop symbolizes entrapment, the White Tiger symbolizes the exceptional ability to escape. The two metaphors fuse to frame Balram's representative status.

The significance of the White Tiger as a symbol of exceptionality is established early in the novel when Balram's school inspector nicknames him a "White Tiger" to recognize him as a rare and exceptional student. While Balram begins his life trapped in the metaphorical Rooster Coop like everyone else, the White Tiger within him signals his

potential to break free. As Himansu S. Mohapatra accurately interprets it, the "*name of Balram, the white tiger, is a measure of the different trajectory he is destined to travel*" (134).

Balram recognizes both his entrapment and exceptionality when he describes the National Zoo in New Delhi, where a White Tiger is kept in a cage. A sign near the tiger's cage reads, "*Imagine yourself in the cage*." Balram responds internally, "*I can do that—I can do that with no trouble at all*" (104). This moment of self-recognition solidifies Balram's understanding of his dual status: as a poor man, he is trapped in the Rooster Coop, but like the caged White Tiger, he is exceptional. However, at this point in the novel, he remains trapped by the same forces that hold everyone else in the Coop. Only he knows that he is a White Tiger, while everyone believes he is just another rooster. Later, visiting the Zoo, reflecting on his past willingness to take the blame for Pinky's accidental killing of a child, Balram admits, "*I was in terror, and yet not once did the thought of running away cross my mind. Not once did the thought, I'll tell the judge the truth, cross my mind. I was trapped in the Rooster Coop*" (104). Here, Balram's entrapment is psychological as much as it is social; his servitude has been "*bred into*" him, "*hammered into [his] skull, nail after nail, and poured into [his] blood*" (115).

Balram's growing awareness of his entrapment reaches a turning point during a confrontation with his fellow servants. While meditating in a Buddha-like pose in Ashok's car about his servitude, Balram is mocked and interrupted. He realizes, "*The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs… The coop is guarded from the inside*" (115). This moment reveals the internal policing mechanism of the underclass by itself. Balram, despite his exceptional potential, is still bound by the psychological forces that keep the majority of India's poor submissive. Schotland interprets this scene as an illustration of Foucault's idea of social discipline, noting that Adiga shows how "*fellow servants discipline the outlier by repressing his individuality*" (7). This internalized oppression is an essential part of the Rooster Coop's function: those within the coop maintain the system, preventing any individual from escaping or challenging the status quo.

Later, during his visit to the Delhi Zoo, Balram encounters a White Tiger pacing inside its cage. He observes, "*He was hypnotizing himself by walking like this—that was the only way he could tolerate this cage*" (167). The sight of the caged White Tiger, unable to escape, resonates deeply with Balram, who faints under the weight of this realization. The symbolism here is that Balram, too, has been hypnotizing himself into accepting his servitude. However, this encounter with the White Tiger cements his determination to break free. He resolves, "*I can't live the rest of my life in a cage*" (168). The two metaphors of the Rooster Coop and the White Tiger, come together in this moment, symbolizing both Balram's entrapment and his unique resolution for liberation. In the end, Balram's decision to kill Ashok and escape from the Coop represents his final transformation from a trapped rooster to a White Tiger. His story thus becomes an allegory of individual rebellion against systemic oppression, where only the rarest of individuals, those willing to sacrifice everything, can break free. Balram himself implicitly acknowledges his typicality and exceptionality both when he instructs the Indian working class, "*The book*

of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly, young Indian. Crap it out, and read. Instead of which, they're all sitting in front of color TVs and watching cricket and shampoo advertisements" (183). Balram means that he can instruct, but he is not a savior. They must do it themselves. Coming from the same starting point, he can still instruct them because his sense of awakening separates him from others trapped in the Coop. Balram recognizes this distinction, saying, "*You ask, 'Are you a man or a demon?' Neither, I say. I have woken up, and the rest of you are still sleeping, and that is the only difference between us*" (190). This framing reinforces the idea that while Balram's predicament of being entrapped is shared by many, his escape from the Coop is unique. Balram's exceptionalism aligns with the forces of neoliberalism that reward single-minded individual initiative. With such a journey of its protagonist, the novel critiques the neoliberal ethos that encourages individual success while ignoring the systemic oppression that keeps the majority trapped. As Betty Joseph argues, this allegorical mode of "*speaking otherwise*", by making the servant appropriate the language of the master, by making the criminal appropriate the language of the entrepreneur, is the novel's way of satirizing neoliberal order (80).

For now, we can hold that Balram, the White Tiger, breaking the Rooster Coop, is a critique of neoliberalism's promises, which can be realized, despite neoliberalist pretensions, by White Tigers only. In this sense, Balram is not merely an individual breaking out of the Rooster Coop but an exceptional and outward-looking postcolonial neoliberal agent whose agency succeeds only because it is propelled by the forces of globalization. Balram's material rise, as well as his representative status, is intimately connected with India's transnational context. Therefore, it is important to understand this context to understand the novel's overall message about the collision between individual and collective agency.

WT is embedded in its transnational context by highlighting the allures and challenges experienced by the native postcolonial population as they face the globalizing world, and by examining how their agency is either evolving or stagnating in interaction with the global transnational environment or the lack thereof. This population gets entangled with neoliberal forces in ways that they like or not, and these forces shape their trajectory, permitting the agency of a few to flourish but blocking the same of most. Nevertheless, India's swift advancement toward a more transnational modernity is depicted as seemingly promising to the postcolonial populace. The transnational spaces, representing prosperity and providing opportunities for people's agency to flourish, are represented as more desirable than the national spaces. To understand how this novel portrays human agency across different regions of India, we can examine the contrast Balram draws between his agency in Laxmangarh, a representative village of the "India of Darkness", and in Bangalore, typifying "*the India of Light*".

WT repeatedly emphasizes the absence of political agency among the general population in Laxmangarh. During elections, their votes are sold to political parties, that too by someone else. Balram narrates this process, "*There was an election coming up, and the tea shop owner had already sold us. He had sold our fingerprints—the inky fingerprints which the illiterate person makes on the ballot paper to indicate his vote*" (57). When one man

attempted to assert his right to vote, he was beaten and stamped to death, "*until he had been stamped back into the earth*" by Vijay, a political leader, and a police officer (60). Bill Ashcroft notes this scene's symbolism, "*the poor are of the soil and are kept there by the system— 'stamped back into the earth'*" (40). This imagery of the poor being forced back into the land highlights the systemic violence that keeps them politically and socially immobile. The electoral rigging is so thorough that the Great Socialist wins 2,341 out of 2,341 votes (59-60). The inability to vote has become a perpetual condition in what Balram calls the India of Darkness. Balram recalls his father's words: "*I've seen twelve elections—five general, five state, two local—and someone else has voted for me twelve times. I've heard that people in the other India get to vote for themselves—isn't that something?*" (59). By showing such disenfranchisement, *WT* fosters a deep mistrust of the governmental machinery, where the poor have no meaningful participation in a country lauded globally as the largest democracy. Ashcroft accurately comments on this aspect of the novel that in it the poor are "*not only subject to the corruption of the system*", but they also "*dwell completely outside the political process*" (40). Balram, recognizing this bleak reality, compares the political discussions in Laxmangarh to "*eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra*" (58), voicing a sense of futility and hopelessness. As Lena Khor argues, poor Indians are "*excluded from access to real political power, civil society organizing, and even legal justice*" (47). Even though India boasts a robust democratic structure, local governance remains underdeveloped, and "*effective accountability*" to the locals remains lacking (Bardhan 126). If we recall here the scene where Ashok and Pinky joke about Balram's ignorance, and Ashok remarks that India's tragedy is that its democracy is entrusted with such uneducated people, we can see the Indian elite's impatience to rise through the global ranks and seeing its poor as a liability (16). For Ashok, such disenfranchisement in the India of Darkness would be okay, but the novel has a more democratic stance. It argues against Ashok by showing that in the absence of people's political agency, the Great Socialist has fostered rampant corruption in Laxmangarh.

Such a lack of agency can be attributed to Laxmangarh's positionality in the global context. Some instances like the presence of motorcars (15) and radio (58) in Laxmangarh prove that despite being a remote village in the heart of the India of Darkness, it occupies an important space in capitalist modernity. Laxmangarh serves as a place from which resources are extracted for the purpose of fueling the energy needs of faraway lands. The most glaring example is the Stork and his sons taking coal from government mines in Dhanbad for free and exporting it to China (Adiga 62). The Stork extracts money from the poor people in Laxmangarh and then uses a part of it to extract coal from Dhanbad, which then goes to China. To do so, the Stork family has hitherto supported and got support from the Great Socialist, the leader responsible for the corruption of democracy in Laxmangarh. Other landlords also take part in the extortion of capital, which they use in other places of India and beyond its borders. Thus, as Joseph shows, these landlords "*function as middlemen between multinational companies and local extraction industries*" (78-79), and the novel can be read as "*a story of multinational capital, where old residual power structures use the rural as a sort of interdiction of the global and the local*" (79). It is reasonable

to assume that just like the Stork, these other landlords also work in collusion with political leaders. The Stork, by bribing politicians like the Great Socialist and later those in Delhi, facilitates his family's coal exports to China, thus completing "*the rural–urban–global circuit of capital (Laxmangarh–Dhanbad–New Delhi–China)*" (78-79). Zayed elaborates on this line of argument, adding that with the example of Laxmangarh, *WT* shows how rural India is losing labor power and resources only to dedicate those to the "*service of international capital*" (67). In the Laxmangarh–Dhanbad–New Delhi–China interconnection, Laxmangarh is losing the most. It is losing its capital, labor, and political agency of its people.

A pivotal moment when Balram fulfills the precondition for attaining higher agency happens in Laxmangarh when he goes up to its Black Fort and rejects all that Laxmangarh represents. The Black Fort had always been an object of his fear in his childhood, but now, when he returns to it as an employee of Ashok and Pinky, the globally mobile and transnationally connected Indians, he is emboldened. From the Black Fort, Balram "*looked down on the village*", and repeatedly spat. This hateful rejection of Laxmangarh is not about the physical location itself, but instead about the destitution it represents. Balram does not romanticize poverty; rather, he identifies squalor in it and is desperate to leave it behind. Accurately, Balram follows this description of spitting toward Laxmangarh with "*Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat*" (26). As Weihsin Gui has noted, in Balram's mind, leaving Laxmangarh behind, which represents poverty and his family, is the necessary condition for being able to kill Ashok (181). By severing ties to Laxmangarh, Balram takes the first step towards killing Ashok, and attains what he considers freedom, which he fully achieves in Bangalore.

Such disenfranchisement and lack of agency in the India of Darkness are in contrast with the India of Light. Balram contrasts these two versions of India several times in his narrative. He explains, "*India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river*" (10). Mrinalini Chakravorty comments that "*the problem of India's globalization, at least as far as Balram is able to make it out, is recognizing the seismic rifts in its very topography*" (94). In this formulation, the India of Light, near the ocean, represents regions more exposed to transnational movements of people and capital. On the other hand, the India of Darkness includes places like Laxmangarh, the "*typical Indian village*" (Adiga 13), which remains marginalized yet crucial to the global economy as we have seen. Contrasting Bangalore, a representative of the India of Light, with Laxmangarh, a representative of the India of Darkness, Balram determines that the main difference between the two is in agency. Balram writes, "[*In Bangalore], if a man wants to be good, he can be good. In Laxmangarh, he doesn't even have this choice. That is the difference between this India and that India: the choice*" (184). The places where the ocean flows have direct transnational connections, and these are the places where there is choice, unlike the places where only rivers flow and they only have secondary contact with the outer world through places like Delhi and Dhanbad. In Balram's case, as a person making a transition from the India of Darkness to

the India of Light, he gains agency, the ability to decide his life's course. Balram defines success in material terms and decides to make a move for such agency as money brings, so it only makes sense for him to settle in the India of Light, in Bangalore. It is the object of attraction for both Balram and the audience of his letter, the Chinese Premier. The question as to why Bangalore allows agency, where people can vote, as Balram's father has heard, and why such places attract people, we have to look at Bangalore's transnational connections and the role it plays globally.

There is a considerable amount of inflow and outflow presented in the novel between India and the world through Bangalore, described as the "*world's center of Technology and Outsourcing*" (3). The importance of entrepreneurial knowledge can be discerned from Balram's statement that Bangalore's outsourcing companies "*virtually run America now*," (4) a bold assertion that emphasizes the impact of entrepreneurial knowledge on global economic structures. Zayed contextualizes Bangalore's importance by positioning it as a "*provider of labor power in the global IT industry*," whose relationship with "*America*" mirrors that between labor and capital in a capitalist system (66). This framing highlights Bangalore as not merely a city but a critical node where labor, fueled by local technological expertise, serves as the foundation of international economic exchange. Zayed further argues that if we take Balram's hyperbole seriously, we can read India's "*hidden vital force that keeps the world market functional*" (67). This claim illustrates how Indian entrepreneurs have utilized their technological expertise and innovative business models to become indispensable to major economies like the USA. That is why the Chinese Premier wants to know about entrepreneurs and is attracted to Bangalore, possibly so that China gets an edge in the global balance of power.

Balram himself is drawn towards Bangalore and its relationship with the world because he sees ample possibilities in them for himself. He explains his choice thus, "*Everything in the city, it seemed, came down to one thing. Outsourcing. Which meant doing things in India for Americans over the phone. Everything flowed from it—real estate, wealth, power, sex. So I would have to join this outsourcing thing, one way or the other*" (179). Balram devises a business idea by utilizing this trait of Bangalore to his advantage:

> *"See, men and women in Bangalore live like the animals in a forest do. Sleep in the day and then work all night, until two, three, four, five o'clock, depending, because their masters are on the other side of the world, in America. Big question: how will the boys and girls—girls especially—get from home to the workplace in the late evening and then get back home at three in the morning?"* (179)

As Joseph points out, this setting where Balram is now planning to run his business underscores the "*temporal division that is part and parcel of the continuing international division of labor*", here between India and the USA, creating "*a working class that works for another time zone*" (74). Utilizing this temporal division as the basis for his business places Balram at a vantage point and solidifies him as someone who knows how to use a globalizing India to his advantage. Meanwhile, Bangalore is ever-growing and

always attracting many transnational companies. Balram narrates, "*General Electric, Dell, Siemens—they're all here in Bangalore. And so many more are on their way. There is construction everywhere*" (191). Zayed notes a parallel here, "*Just as the rural villages of darkness exist as a steady supplier of cheap labor for urban India, so, too, the affluent urban locations of India serve as the steady supplier of cheap labor for tech-firms located elsewhere, in the core capitalist countries of Europe and North America*" (70). In other words, a large number of technologically skilled Indians are shown in *WT* as willful contributors to companies situated offshore, showcasing their eagerness to associate with the transnational space. In the future, Balram does not want to be an exception. Like Balram's current business idea, his next business idea also takes advantage of globalization. He plans to go into Real Estate, selling to the Americans who are about to arrive in Bangalore. He outlines his plan, "*I'm thinking of real estate next. You see, I'm always a man who sees "tomorrow" when others see "today." … And when all these Americans come here, where do you think they're all going to sleep? On the road*?" (192). Balram realized the power of being attached to the transnational flow of capital, and so his entrepreneurial business ideas, one after another, are based on this flow. In Khor's words, Balram's ambitions are driven by "*a logic where … neoliberal globalization is the inescapable hegemon*" ruling the world, and so he makes such decisions (42). Balram knows that in the transnational, there is a trove of opportunities.

That Balram has more agency in Bangalore is evident in almost everything he does there, but one scene stands out. One night, when Asif, a driver working in Balram's company, accidentally kills a boy, Balram does not panic as he did in a similar situation in Delhi when Pinky accidentally killed a boy. Whereas in Delhi he fled the scene with Ashok and Pinky, in Bangalore, he asks his driver to "*call the police at once*" and "*to get these women home, first of all*." These acts show he is mentally in total control of the situation, which is trickier in Bangalore, because he is the owner now. He knows he can face the system and use it to his advantage. Praveen Shetty, Vishnumoorthy Prabhu, and Pratapchandra T comment, "*Balram knows very well that he is in a different place where money provides one with choices*" (283). The combination of capital and Bangalore has provided Balram with choices.

However, Balram's gain in agency does not paint a rosy picture. He characterizes himself as a "*citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness*" (116). To transition from servant to master, Balram murders his employer and steals his money. Apart from unethicality, his actions after crossing sides are equally problematic for other reasons. For one, his behavior mimics that of his former masters and frustrates any chance of positive change. Just as Ashok and his family bribed political leaders to evade taxes, Balram bribes policemen in Bangalore to navigate business obstacles and avoid legal consequences after one of his drivers accidentally kills a poor boy (180-1). After the accident, the victim's brother seeks justice, but Balram manipulates the system so the police cannot provide any for the bereaved family. Balram's exercise of agency stifles that of others.

Balram's individual material rise conveys the message that collective agency cannot flourish. In the changed global context, opportunities exist, but they are accessible only to exceptional figures like Balram: opportunistic and willing to sacrifice morality

and family ties. For Balram, doing such things is synonymous with breaking out of the exploitative system. Therefore, as critic Liani Lochner points out, Balram is "*presenting agency in terms of individual, not collective action; the subject is the source of his or her own liberation*" (44). Similarly, Toral Gajarawala argues that Balram declares injustice, but to overcome it as a person, he "*posits a means that not everyone can apply*" (22). Balram merely positions himself as "*an apex predator*" (Walther, 590), but does nothing to even think about how to rebuild the jungle to make it more equitable. The manner of his rise actually suggests that an inherently oppressive social structure will prevail. Commenting on the novel, Brouillette reaches similar conclusions. She says that the novel embodies an "*antisocial entrepreneurial ethos*" that is "*oriented only toward the survival and success of the lone individual*" (95). Balram's self-conception becomes that of an "*entrepreneurial engine*", making agency available only to those with the audacity and ruthlessness to exploit it (83).

More importantly, a key precondition for Balram's rise is his willingness to accept that his family members would likely be killed because of his actions. By framing Balram's journey as one of individual, not collective, agency, the novel is critiquing a broader societal condition in neoliberal India, arguing that under such conditions, only those individuals who further subjugate their communities will rise. Balram explicitly rejects the possibility of a collective revolution, telling the premier, "*People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else… That will never happen*" (183). Balram's inability to conceptualize a different future or identity reflects the "*ideological closure*" of the system, preventing any genuine liberation for the broader community, argues Lochner (46).

Such individual progress premised on further marginalization of the collective helps the novel challenge the neoliberal assumption that globalization will result in freedom and agency for most. While Balram's rise signals individual success, the novel stresses a darker truth: the upliftment of the amoral individualist is achievable only by ensuring that others remain in poverty, allowing him to exploit them to serve the demands of the global economy. Through Balram's story, *WT* shows the hollowness of the neoliberal ethos that promises widespread prosperity but often leaves the underclass trapped in cycles of exploitation and marginalization.

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