


Invisible Chains: Structural Violence as a Narrative Device in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

 Dilip N. Rathod



Assistant Professor, RTMNU, India;

diliprathod.dacn@gmail.com | ORCID: 0009-0003-2270-325X



Research Article | Accepted version published on 28 July 2025



<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16519986>

ABSTRACT

This article examines the deployment of structural violence as a narrative pivot in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, which won the Booker Prize in 2008. Rooting the analysis in Johan Galtung's seminal concept of structural violence, as refracted through Paul Farmer's anthropological sensibility, the inquiry focuses on the interplay of narrative stratagems—chiefly the confessional first-person frame, the emblematic “Rooster Coop,” and a sarcastic humor—through which Adiga discerns the calibrated mechanisms of social marginality, political disenfranchisement, and economic extraction that delimit the trajectory of Balram Halwai. A meticulous reading of the text's rhetorical choices, complemented by a scrutiny of character formation, reveals that the author unsettles orthodox portrayals of destitution and class antagonism by bringing to light the obdurate, if imperceptible, forms of violence sedimented in the nation's postcolonial apparatus. The inquiry furthermore theorises that *The White Tiger* operates simultaneously as a literary achievement and a sociological record, interrogating hegemonic discourses of Indian economic ascendancy while foregrounding the structural impediments that renew the circuits of subjugation and insurgency.

Keywords: structural violence; Aravind Adiga; *The White Tiger*; narrative technique; postcolonial studies; social inequality

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, which was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2008, delivers a scathing critique of twenty-first-century Indian society through the confessional account of Balram Halwai, a rural driver who, in a single, grisly act, leaves his caste and poverty behind in pursuit of urban success. Balram's ascent, however, is undergirded by moral equivocation and a calculated brutality that make him both a product and a mirror of the system he denounces. The scholarly conversation has fruitfully examined the novel's treatment of class antagonisms, official malfeasance, and the illusion of upward mobility. However, few studies have interrogated how Adiga deploys structural violence as a subtler, yet more insidious, narrative instrument. The present paper seeks to fill this analytical void by demonstrating how the text reveals the invisible machinery of oppression that Johan Galtung designates as "structural violence": the socially sanctioned arrangements that, by curtailing access to essential resources, inflict avoidable suffering and death (Galtung 167). Through narrative stratagems that include unreliable testimony, foreshortened temporality, and a dispassionate catalog of deprivation, Adiga forces the reader to confront the brutality that ideology conceals beneath the surface of liberal individualism.

Structural violence, a term introduced by the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung in 1969, refers to the violence "built into the structure" of social systems, manifesting not through immediate physical injury but through enduring inequalities (Galtung 169). Whereas direct violence reveals a visible aggressor, structural violence remains diffusely operational, embedded in the design of institutions, the distribution of resources, and the norms that govern everyday life. Paul Farmer extended this notion within the field of medical anthropology, characterising structural violence as "social arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way... embedded in the political and economic organisation of our social world" (Farmer 305). Building upon these foundations, Paul Gready formulates a tripartite schema that disaggregates structural violence into social marginalisation, political exclusion, and economic exploitation, underscoring the interdependence and cumulative effect of these mechanisms (Gready 18).

The present research contends that Balram Halwai is not only an archetype of upward aspiration but also a product of structural violence who, in his quest for a better life, inadvertently becomes an agent of his oppression. Adiga's narrative employs the epistolary form, the emblem of the "Rooster Coop," disorienting

subjectivity, and corrosive humour to delineate a literary space in which systemic violence is revealed as both constraint and incitement within twenty-first-century India. The very architecture of the story thus serves as an analytical lens, illuminating how the disenfranchised, while manoeuvring and at times resisting, ultimately reproduce the configurations of power that entrap them.

Galtung's Conception of Structural Violence

In his landmark 1969 essay "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," Johan Galtung introduced the term structural violence to the lexicon of peace studies, delineating it from distinguishable acts of direct violence by its systemic, often obscured, character. He characterised structural violence as the "avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs," a by-product of social arrangements that inhibit individuals from realising their inherent capacities (Galtung 168). In contrast to direct violence, which has identifiable perpetrators and victims, structural violence is perpetuated by institutional configurations that, under the guise of neutrality, systematically marginalise particular populations.

Galtung's classification identifies three mutually reinforcing modes of violence: direct, structural, and cultural. Direct violence entails bodily injury or death carried out by identifiable individuals or collectives. In contrast, cultural violence operates within the realm of symbols, discourses, and beliefs, legitimating both direct and structural manifestations. Structural violence, situated between the two extremes, operates through formal and informal social institutions, entrenching inequitable distributions of resources, opportunities, and authority (Galtung 171). This analytical apparatus is especially pertinent to postcolonial contexts, where retained colonial legacies continue to reproduce disparities by embedding them within ostensibly neutral institutional protocols.

Farmer's Anthropological Development

Farmer's anthropological scholarship further elaborates on Galtung by insisting that structural violence is inseparable from specific historical-material constellations. He characterises structural violence as "a host of offensives against human dignity," including, but not limited to, extreme poverty, racial discrimination, and gender subordination, each of which intersects to produce suffering that could otherwise be averted (Farmer 307). Central to Farmer's argument is the insistence that structural violence is corporeal; the pains and debilities that accrue to subjugated populations are not merely statistical effects of inequitable structures but literal inscriptions on the human body and psyche, manifesting through

disparities in health care, educational attainment, and economic opportunity (Farmer et al. 1686).

Farmer's investigation invites us to see structural violence not merely as the residue of colonial history but as a continually reconstituted process of domination, engineered by configurations of power that enable ruling groups to profit while condemning others to systematic exclusion (De Maio 678). Such a vantage point is indispensable for the study of postcolonial literature, which habitually uncovers the ongoing, dialectical relationship between the sedimented effects of empire and the re-spun circuits of present-day exploitation.

Gready's Three Pillars Framework

Paul Gready's analytic triad—social marginalisation, political exclusion, and economic exploitation—renders the operational logic of structural violence legible across a spectrum of institutional and experiential sites (Gready 20). Social marginalisation prohibits designated groups from being recognised as full members of the polity, drawing on classifiers such as caste, class, or ethnicity. Political exclusion deprives the same groups of the capacity to access citizenship rights, participate in the electoral process, and invoke a protective legal framework. Economic exploitation, ultimately, bars them from labour markets, credit instruments, and any capital that might foster upward mobility (Gready 22).

Together, the three pillars of the framework interlock to produce what Gready describes as a “matrix of domination” in which structural inequalities are not merely reproduced, but reproduced in a form that is legible across generations (Gready 25). The model thus becomes a heuristic for reading literary works that dramatise the simultaneous and interdependent navigation of these overlapping circuits of oppression by marginalised characters.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative literary analytic framework grounded in close reading in order to interrogate the deployment of structural violence as a narrative mechanism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Central to the inquiry is the identification of textual markers that correspond to Gready's triadic schema of structural violence—social marginalisation, political exclusion, and economic exploitation—while simultaneously assessing the authorial techniques that bring these otherwise concealed phenomena into the reader's field of perception.

To anchor *The White Tiger* within expanded theoretical horizons, the methodology cross-references scholarship in structural violence and postcolonial

literary criticism. Particular emphasis is accorded to extracts that reveal constraints impinging upon character agency, narrative junctures that disclose institutional dynamics of violence, and performative language that highlights the disjunction between aspirational official narratives and the quotidian reality of subaltern lives.

Additionally, the study integrates narrative analysis to elucidate how Adiga's formal decisions—the epistolary frame, the deployment of an unreliably first-person narrator, and various metaphorical schemas—operate as aesthetic instruments of critique. This dual focus on thematic and formal dimensions enables a refined exploration of how *The White Tiger* contributes to emergent modes of social critique within the corpus of contemporary Indian English literature.

Manifestations of Structural Violence in Setting and Space

Adiga's narrative inscribes structural violence within the axial divide between the regions Balram designates as “the Darkness” and “the Light.” This rhetorical dichotomy transcends mere spatial depiction; it constitutes a disciplined spatial critique revealing how geographies of power preconfigure possibilities for existence and pathways for suffering (Choudhury 28). Balram's natal village of Laxmangarh inhabits “the Darkness” not as a metaphorical obscurity, but as the zone in which the absence of capital, infrastructure, and a recognised future collapses simultaneously into the absence of light.

The text's incipit maps this structural geography by placing in Balram's allocution to the Chinese Premier the terse, definitive assertion, “I was born and raised in Darkness” (Adiga 14). The proposition serves as both a statement of place and an analytic proposition, collapsing the distinction between personal narrative and sociological index. Its force lies in the dissolution of agency into the preconditions supplied by spatial marginalisation. The metaphor thereby demonstrates the potency of spatial segregation in reproducing structural violence: by corraling educational, health, and entrepreneurial assets into metropolitan loci, the order compels entire populations to remain permanently outside the circuitry of recognised development (Rana 458).

Adiga's portrayal of the village illustrates how structural violence manifests through the systematic neglect of institutions, rather than overt coercion. The lack of sufficient schools, clinics, and economic services constitutes what Galtung identified as “negative violence”: the damage inflicted by barricading people from the essentials of life rather than by striking them directly (Galtung 170). Balram's reflection, “Above all, I got the thing that we who grow up in the Darkness value most of all. A uniform,” captures how systematic deprivation distorts the value of

elementary markers of civic inclusion, rendering them rare prizes and exposing the exclusion that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary (Adiga 33).

The opposition of rural “Darkness” and metropolitan “Light” illustrates the spatiality of structural violence, in which one’s geographic position prescribes variation in access to valued life chances (Farmer 310). Nevertheless, Adiga complicates this partition by demonstrating that structural violence persists even in locales that outwardly appear to offer advantages. Balram’s sojourn in Delhi, while outwardly liberated by distance from the village, encounters novel regulations and hierarchies that curtail his agency, thus manifesting the persistence of structural violence across disparate urban and rural settings.

Cultural and Social Mechanisms of Constraint

The narrative's most resonant symbol of structural violence arrives through Balram’s metaphor of the “Rooster Coop,” illustrating how social control is reproduced via diffused mechanisms that replace overt repression with habitual compliance (El-Sobky 2638). Balram recounts:

“Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they are next. However, they do not rebel. They do not try to escape from the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country” (Adiga 173).

This image crystallises Galtung’s insistence that structural violence functions via internalised restraints that render opposition seem both futile and inconceivable (Galtung 174). The coop thus signifies more than the extraction of surplus labour; it delineates a total matrix of social subjugation, converging, as Gready has shown, through the confluence of cultural subordination, systematic exclusion from political voice, and the coercive management of economic resources (Gready 26).

Through the metaphor of the coop, the novel illuminates how structural violence is mediated by psychological mechanisms that persuade the subordinated of their irrevocable incapacity, even in the presence of latent alternatives. Balram observes:

“A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9% to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of

emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse" (Adiga 175).

The remark illuminates how structural violence operates not merely by external coercion, but also by internalising oppressive ideologies that render resistance not only improbable but also perilous.

The narrative further illustrates how caste, familial duty, and economic dependency intersect to forge overlapping strata of constraint that mutually reinforce one another (Bandra 52). Balram's earliest failure to liberate himself from the village is traceable not to tangible impediments but to social prescriptions, familial obligations, and an internalised script regarding the comportment appropriate to one of his stations. This instance corroborates Farmer's contention that structural violence is enacted through the confluence of several axes of inequality that collectively generate perpetually disadvantageous conditions (Farmer et al. 1690).

Narrative Techniques Unveiling Structural Violence

Adiga's formal innovations in narrative technique function as aesthetic strategies that render structural violence visible in ways conventional realist narration often obscures. Comprising letters addressed to Premier Wen Jiabao of China, the novel's epistolary frame produces multiple layers of irony that reveal the disjunction between the official rhetoric of progress and the lived realities of marginalisation (Salve 2228).

This frame grants the narrator the authority to present Balram's life as both an intimate confession and a rigorous socio-political analysis, enabling a voice that shifts fluidly between singular experience and broader systemic critique. Such a choice enables the text to operate simultaneously as a bildungsroman and a work of sociological inquiry, demonstrating that the individual's rise is inextricably linked to navigating entrenched structural constraints.

Balram's self-appointed role as unreliable narrator is decisive for the portrayal of structural violence. His moral haziness and persistent self-exculpation reveal how structural violence produces settings in which ethical choice is rendered fraught yet inescapable, compelling subjects simultaneously to recognise responsibility for their actions and to confront circumscribed agency (Lee 118). His recurring formulation, "I am a man of action and change" (Adiga 89), resonates as both personal motto and sardonic commentary on the truncated agency afforded to the marginalised.

The narrative's deployment of dark humour acts, as Sonba Salve has noted, as a "tactical device" that renders Balram's bleak perspective simultaneously palatable and unsettling to the reader (Salve 2230). Through this formal manoeuvre, Adiga exposes the depths of social malignancy while sustaining reader involvement, thereby producing a kind of aesthetic that, while cloaked in irony, exposes the persistence of harm concealed from direct view.

Effects on Characterisation and Identity

Illustrating this aesthetic, Balram evolves from the lamb that the village system breeds to the tiger that the metropolitan market finally tolerates. However, this metamorphosis cannot be distilled into the celebratory arc of upward mobility; it is rather a fraught negotiation in which the very forces of structure that he seeks to overleap recalibrate the terms of exploitation. As Poudel observes, the ascent into entrepreneurship merely re-entrenches the hierarchical logics of servitude from which Balram initially fled (Poudel 34).

The result is, in Paul Farmer's terms, a choreography of "truncated agency." Choices in this *mise-en-scène* are unmistakable; however, the orbit within which they are circumscribed is so narrow that the script of the body and the city renders a particular denouement almost unavoidable (Farmer 315). Balram's assassination of Ashok, the moment at which the narrative reaches its formal and moral apogee, embodies this paradox. The stabbing is simultaneously the punctuation of emancipation and the reenactment of the systemic cruelty that authorises it, collapsing the distinction between ascent and re-entrenchment in a single, bloody flourish.

Balram's ultimate emergence as a wealthy entrepreneur illustrates the novel's nuanced conception of structural violence as both a limit and a breeding ground for agency. His ascension hinges not on the dismantling of entrenched inequities but on a shrewd circumvention of them that, paradoxically, consolidates the same hierarchies he once inhabited. From his newly minted vantage, he surmises, "I do not like showing weakness in front of my employees. I know what that leads to" (Adiga 318). This remark crystallises how his flight from structural violence necessitates its re-enactment in altered forms, thereby attesting to the auto-reproductive circuitry the text exposes.

Balram's trajectory thus illustrates what Uttam Poudel has described: structural violence remands its subjects to acts of direct violence as the sole remaining agency (Poudel 36). However, Adiga's framing of this trajectory declines to render the outcome either heroic or lamentable. Instead, it lays bare the grim

calculus by which systemic oppression mutates, migrating across social scales without ever dissipating. Such a reading aligns with Ratti's observation that the narrative exposes the inescapable continuity of violence in a world that permits upward movement only by reaffirming the ground of its emergence (Ratti 235).

Comparative Considerations

The White Tiger enters the established tradition of postcolonial literature, which utilises innovative narrative forms to make visible the structural violence embedded in everyday life. Like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Adiga's work rehearses aesthetic techniques that give voice to forms of coercion that do not culminate in visible, recorded injury, yet that decisively shape subjectivity and social position. However, the novel departs from its predecessors in its concentration on the conditions of late neoliberal capitalism rather than on colonial governance or the immediate aftermath of independence. This chronological choice enables Adiga to trace how long-standing techniques of exclusion and domination evolve within shifting economic paradigms, yet reproduce the same patterns of social segmentation and dispossession. The narrative illustrates how the extension of global supply chains and the commodification of mobility become new vehicles for the same structural violence that older colonial forms had deployed.

The novel's urban setting and its focus on the service sector further distinguish it from the rural and agrarian themes of earlier postcolonial depictions of violence, such as Mahasweta Devi's tribal tales or Mulk Raj Anand's factory novels. By situating coercive social order within the ostensibly dynamic environments of contemporary extranational capitalism—call centres and gated corporate enclaves—Adiga exposes the persistence of systematic oppression despite the surface appearance of modernity and economic growth. His mapping of precarity across the surface gloss of global capitalism therefore illuminates how exclusion and mobility become indistinguishable in the neoliberal city, forcing the scholar to reconsider not only the temporal boundaries of the postcolonial, but the very meaning of development itself.

This study demonstrates that Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* employs structural violence not only as a subject for critique but also as a deliberate narrative engine that reveals the routinised processes by which present-day Indian society reproduces inequality and exclusion. The "Rooster Coop" figure, the epistolary frame, the oscillation between reliability and deceit in the narrator's voice, and the deployment of dark wit are among the formal techniques that give the text a

distinctive capacity to present forms of violence that usually elude the registers of official discourse.

Conclusion

Adiga's achievement extends beyond critiquing social injustice to reshape postcolonial literary aesthetics. By fashioning narrative forms that bring structural violence into the realm of literary visibility, the author subscribes to what one might call a "literature of structural analysis," in which formal experimentation and systemic exposure are inextricably linked. This method highlights how present-day neoliberal capitalism conceals its exclusionary logic through mechanisms that masquerade as impartial or even beneficial, thereby quietly confining marginalised groups to the periphery of economic and social life.

The research yields a series of reflections that may guide subsequent scholarship in postcolonial literary studies. The novel's articulation of structural violence provides a robust theoretical lens that encourages readings of postcolonial fiction that depart from the reductive polarities of coloniser and colonised. Such a lens obliges critics to interrogate the intricate co-implications of class, caste, gender, and neoliberal economic positioning that coexist within postcolonial formations. Secondly, a sustained focus on narrative form emerges here as a mode of social analysis. The work's inventive formal strategies reveal that formal experimentation in postcolonial fiction often operates not only to innovate aesthetics but also to engineer new registers of ideological critique.

The depiction of structural violence in *The White Tiger* highlights the persistence of systematic disparity within societies that claim to be democratic and progressive. Balram's quest for upward mobility exposes the paradox whereby individual triumph in a violently stratified system may condition the replication of the very exploitative machinery from which the individual endeavours to flee. The implication, therefore, is that the dismantling of systematic oppression cannot be entrusted to individualised ascent but must be pursued through collective mobilisation. In a moment where global capitalism incessantly generates novel configurations of inequality and exclusion, Adiga's formal and thematic reworkings of structural violence provide critics and movements with exemplary archives for apprehending and contesting these emergent modalities of systematic harm.

The novel illustrates that structural violence is not a distant theoretical construct but a concrete, everyday condition that moulds personal identity, restricts access to upward mobility, and engenders inequality in enduring, intergenerational cycles. By employing a range of advanced narrative strategies, *The White Tiger*

exposes literature's dual capacity for artistic elaboration and incisive social critique, thereby furnishing a complementary and expansive reading of systemic oppression that reinforces and broadens scholarly investigations of structural violence and social stratification.

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