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**“Live like a Man:” Analysing *The White Tiger*’s Balram Halwai in a Patriarchal India**

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*Abstract*

Gender, as a socially constructed role that societies assign to individuals based on their perceived sex, has been significantly influenced by social and cultural norms throughout history (Connell 1987, 70). In patriarchal societies like India, the concept of masculinity is particularly shaped by the prevailing social and cultural factors. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of masculinity through the character of Balram Halwai in Arvind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008). The primary focus of this study lies in exploring how rigid gender roles contribute to the perpetuation of child abuse and child labour under the guise of upholding “masculinity.” By employing R.W. Connell’s theory of masculinities, Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, structural functionalism perspectives on gender, the paper delves into the character of Balram Halwai to investigate the profound impact that social expectations and gender roles have on his psyche. Furthermore, the paper investigates the extreme measures Balram undertakes in his pursuit of embodying the societal ideals of being a “man.” This study offers an intricate multidimensional exploration of masculinity in a patriarchal Indian context, uncovering the ways in which social expectations and gender roles can profoundly impact individuals’ lives.

**Keywords:** Child Labour, Child Abuse, Masculinity, Gender, Freedom, Murder.

**Introduction**

In the annals of contemporary literature, Arvind Adiga emerges as an exceptional literary virtuoso whose compelling *oeuvre* meticulously dissects the intricate tapestry of class struggle, systemic oppression, and the unwavering quest for freedom, etching an indelible mark on the minds of readers worldwide. *The White Tiger* (2008) is one such novel by Adiga, set amidst the dense jungle of patriarchal society where men are supposed to hold primary power and

authority. The novel portrays a harrowing human condition where societal expectations and gender norms intertwine to produce a twisted concept of masculinity. At the heart of this literary masterpiece lies Balram Halwai, a young protagonist whose life takes a momentous turn following a childhood tragedy. He is the son of a rickshaw puller who dies a slow and tragic death. Following this incident, Balram is taken out of school to work at a tea shop to provide for his family. This pivotal event catapults him into a struggle between his aspirations for social mobility and the burden of providing for his family, as dictated by patriarchal norms. The convergence of these conflicting forces presents a unique opportunity to explore how traumatic incidents in youth can shape perceptions of masculinity.

The novel opens with a letter written by Balram Halwai to the Premier of China, Wen Jiabao. The narrative is a first-person account of Balram's life in a letter written over seven nights. Each night Balram writes another "instalment" of his story, which makes up a chapter. This epistolary structure allows Balram to directly address the Premier and share the details of how he went from a village boy to a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. Despite Balram's exceptional performance at school, where he is hailed as a rare and exceptional talent—a "white tiger" that appears once in a generation— following his father's premature death, his family forces him out of school (Adiga 27). Balram is forced to meet the expectations thrust upon him as a man in a traditional society. Such expectations lead families to send their children to work, contributing to the prevalence of child labour. Balram gets employed at a tea shop where he is regularly beaten and thrashed by his employer. The patriarchal context of Indian society provides a rich tapestry for examining Balram's evolution and the toll it takes on his identity. As the story unfolds, Balram's first-hand experience of familial exploitation and the downfall of his father become defining moments that shape his understanding of masculinity. His adherence to societal expectations is marked by a sense of duty and responsibility, exemplifying the traditional male provider role. However, this adherence leads to inner conflict as Balram desires social mobility and recognition. His internal conflicts manifest in subtle expressions of rebellion against the existing power structures. Through critical analysis, the study challenges conventional stereotypes associated with masculinity, paving the way for questioning and re-evaluating harmful gender norms that perpetuate inequality and discrimination.

### **Balram Halwai's Exposure to Masculinity**

Masculinity, as a concept, is intricately woven into the fabric of cultural and societal norms, exerting a profound influence on individuals' identities and experiences. In the literary landscape of *The White Tiger*, the character of Balram Halwai emerges as a captivating canvas

upon which the complexities of masculine identity are artfully painted. In the tapestry of masculinity within a patriarchal Indian society, it becomes imperial to decode the complexities surrounding male identities and experiences. Connell's theory of "masculinities" acknowledges that masculinity is not a singular, fixed construct but a socially constructed and fluid category, influenced by cultural and historical contexts (Connell 1995, 82). Within the context of the novel's narrative, male characters are burdened with the societal expectation of being breadwinners for their families. They migrate to the cities in search of employment opportunities and return a month before the onset of the monsoon season. Their return is characterised by physical changes reflective of the difficult life they lead: "the men came back . . . leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh" (Adiga 21). The imagery of their reception resembles the predatory nature of wildcats descending upon a slab of flesh, symbolising the intensity of their economic dependency and the urgency to secure financial support.

Balram's father is unable to uplift the family out of their impoverished circumstances. His death places significant pressure on Balram to break the cycle of financial struggle and assume the role of provider for his extended family. Such pressure to conform to his gender role as a male provider, echoes Judith Butler's concept of "gender performativity," which asserts that gender identity is not inherent but rather a continuous series of performative actions (Butler 178). The societal conformity in a patriarchal Indian society fuels Balram's ambitious pursuit of escaping village life in Laxmangarh and becoming a prosperous entrepreneur in the city. As an assertion of his masculinity, Balram learns how to drive a car, a skill associated with city-dwellers of higher status. Employed as a chauffeur for a wealthy landlord's family in Dhanbad, Balram finds a sense of pride in symbols of masculine success, such as his uniform and the ability to drive luxurious cars: "I saw myself reflected in the glass panes—all in khaki. I walked back and forth in front of that bank a dozen times, just gaping at myself" (Adiga 45). However, despite these outward symbols, he remains subservient in his role as a servant, which erodes his sense of masculinity. Balram begins to question and challenge the traditional expectations of masculinity imposed upon him. Determined to liberate himself from the restrictive confines of the Rooster Coop—a metaphor for the oppressive master-servant system his family and patriarchal society have ensnared him in—he decides to forge his unique path, displaying an alternative form of masculinity characterised by ambition and a fervent desire for personal agency.

### **Shaping Masculinity: Social Expectations, Traumatic Loss, and the Quest for Autonomy**

Social expectations play a significant role in shaping one's identity, as individuals often internalise societal norms and values (Marcia 554). When Balram is just a child, his father, a rickshaw puller, imparts a poignant sentiment, expressing his long-standing experience of being treated as an animal: "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine—at least one—should live like a man" (Adiga 24). His father imposes his expectations of manhood onto his son, instilling in him a strong association between masculinity and wealth. Since social norms and expectations influence individuals' behaviour and decision-making, Balram's idea of a "man" is significantly attached to social status and wealth from the start. To "live like a man," in young Balram's eyes, encompasses possessing attributes such as dignity, respect, access to education—attributes that money can bring. He closely associates wealth with the idea of manhood.

The pivotal loss of his father, who succumbs to illness without proper medical care, challenges Balram's understanding of masculinity. He realises that his family had fed on his father "until he got tuberculosis and died on the floor of a government hospital, waiting for some doctor to see him, spitting blood on this wall and that" (Adiga 57). Witnessing his father's emasculating defeat amplifies Balram's belief that providing for and protecting one's family is central to being a man in Indian society. Although poverty had prevented his father from fulfilling this role, it leaves Balram determined to succeed where his father could not—a manifestation of Connell's notion of multiple masculinities. The family's financial constraints and the unfortunate loss of a wage earner force them to take a loan from a landlord named Stork, who insists that all family members must work for him in repayment: "he wanted all the members of the family working for him and he had seen me in school, or his collector had. So they had to hand me over too" (Adiga 28). Consequently, Balram's dreams of education are crushed, and his immediate labour is commandeered, prioritising the family's immediate needs at the expense of his well-being as he experiences what Pleck calls "gender role strain" (Pleck 11). This forced removal from school deepens his sense of disempowerment, leaving him unable to break free from the same servitude that entrapped his father. The compounding effect of this second loss intensifies the impact of his father's death and further contributes to Balram's deprivation of personal agency and status within the hierarchies of patriarchal power. Driven by his traumatic experiences, Balram becomes obsessed with proving his manhood through financial success, willing to resort to morally questionable acts. This pursuit of dominance, control, and self-reliance, at any cost, aligns with Butler's idea of gender performativity, as Balram internalises society's expectations of what it means to be a successful man in a

patriarchal context (Butler 179). The trauma reshapes Balram's view of manhood, underscoring the struggles faced by individuals seeking to navigate societal norms while striving for autonomy and self-definition.

### **The Elusive Pursuit of Masculinity: Balram's Struggle Against Class, Patriarchy, and Societal Control**

The confluence of class struggle, patriarchal structures, and societal norms creates a complex web of challenges and opportunities, with profound implications for the construction of gender roles, economic disparities, and social hierarchies. Having been forced to abandon his education and work as a labourer from a young age, Balram is entrapped within a patriarchal structure that designates men as primary source of income, regardless of their age or circumstances. This expectation imprisons him in a cycle of toil and deprivation, leaving him with limited opportunities for better employment or social status. He realises that he lacks the requisite skills or academic degrees to secure a proper job, pushing him to learn to drive a car with the hope of improving his social standing and prospects. However, his life as a driver to the Stork family lays bare the profound intertwining of class struggle, patriarchal influence, and societal expectations. Within this exploitative system, he is burdened with relentless work hours, relegated to eating last, and denied even basic comforts like a proper place to sleep. Balram reflects on his experience as a driver, recognising that it did not truly elevate his status. He confesses candidly, "What it meant to live like a man was a mystery," thereby highlighting the complexity and uncertainty surrounding the concept of masculinity and societal expectations (Adiga 24). The development of working-class Indian masculinities is marked by intricate connections with caste, socioeconomics, and migration (Srivastava 329). This interplay influences a myriad of societal factors that contribute to shaping Balram's perception of manhood.

In Balram's poignant exploration, the notion of "living like a man" emerges as an elusive concept, initially envisioned as a means to break free from the shackles of servitude and degradation associated with his caste origins—a tribute to fulfilling his late father's wishes. He becomes a driver because he believed this elevated status will offer a taste of freedom. However, the revelation that even his elevated position as a driver fails to deliver true freedom, underscores the insidious influence of patriarchal norms and the systemic inequality prevalent in an India which "has never been free" of oppressive power structures (Adiga 19). This refers to the lack of true independence and freedom for many Indians, due to class stratification, caste discrimination, and poverty. Balram notes how the wealthy gather detailed information about

their employees to control and manipulate them, creating a “Rooster Coop” strategy. This tactic prevents the working class from rebelling, as one person’s actions can impact his entire family. Balram explains that breaking free from this pervasive control mechanism requires significant effort, as the servants keep other servants check by constantly reminding them of the potential consequences of defiance. Balram confirms “...only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed - hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters -can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being... it would, in fact, take a White Tiger” (Adiga 106). Balram emphasises that the path to liberation demands extraordinary resilience and a willingness to face the most horrifying consequences. In this context, “White Tiger” symbolises a rare and fearless person capable of transcending the societal norms and challenging the existing power dynamics, even at the cost of immense personal sacrifice. Balram’s statement also underscores the enormity of the struggle for freedom and the enormity of the obstacles faced by those seeking to break free from the cycle of oppression and servitude.

### **Balram’s Struggle for Autonomy and Identity**

Balram, raised in a lower-class environment, internalises lower-class values but harbours a strong aspiration for social mobility and a better life which conflict with the norms imposed by his background. These conflicting beliefs generate a psychological discomfort, as Balram recognises the disparity between his current circumstances and his aspirations. Kusum’s expectation for Balram to marry and fulfil traditional family responsibilities, imposes an inevitable destiny. The complexities of societal norms and expectations regarding traditional marriages, become evident as Balram reminisces about Kishan’s wedding, underlining the transactional nature of such unions: “I remember exactly what we got in dowry from the girl’s side, and thinking about it even now makes my mouth fill up with water: five thousand rupees cash, all crisp new unsoiled notes fresh from the bank, plus a Hero bicycle, plus a thick gold necklace for Kishan” (Adiga 35). The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations weighs heavily on his journey, tugs at the delicate fabric of his identity. He starts having conflicting and discomfoting thoughts about fulfilling family obligations vis-à-vis pursuing career advancement away from his family: “At once I knew what was troubling me. I did not want to obey Kusum” (Adiga 115). Balram is motivated to take extreme measures and be willing to do anything to alleviate the psychological discomfort and align his beliefs and aspirations. Festinger claims that “the need to avoid dissonance [is] just as basic as the need for safety or the need to satisfy hunger” (Griffin 2006, 228). Balram resolves discomfort by re-evaluating values and justifying choices to align behaviour with his goal of social mobility, reducing psychological discomfort from conflicting beliefs.

In Delhi with Ashok, Balram chauffeurs his master to meet politicians at hotels and offices. Balram notices that the red bag filled with cash helps Ashok solve his problems and be a true “man.” Balram wants to escape the life of a servant. He reaches his breaking point when his employers attempt to falsely implicate him in a hit-and-run killing, thrusting him into a position of unjust persecution: “I was to go to jail for a killing I had not done” (Adiga 106). The realisation of being unjustly accused of Ashok’s wife’s crime, crystallises for Balram the inherent injustice of the social order, where he is denied even the most basic elements of dignity and agency. Faced with the suffocating confines of the “Rooster Coop,” Balram resolves that the only path to genuine freedom and living life on his own terms as a “man” is to rebel and break free from servitude, culminating in his decision to eliminate Mr. Ashok, his employer. This extreme measure is reflective of how conformity had caused an irreversible damage to his perception of wrong and right. There seems to be a significant correlation between conformity to traditional masculine norms and negative social functioning which can lead to grim choices (Wong et al. 90). In his quest to embody the true essence of manhood, he associates this concept with taking control of his destiny, defying unjust authority, and breaking the chains of servitude that have restrained him for far too long. Murder, in Balram’s mind, becomes the grim but necessary vehicle through which he can achieve liberation and independence. Balram’s flawed logic connects his idea of living “like a man” with the necessity of killing Ashok to escape servitude and gain true independence. The act is intrinsically linked to his personal pursuit of freedom and dignity.

### **Murder: Balram’s Ticket to Freedom**

Balram, as a poor and marginalised individual in a hierarchical society, contemplates extreme measures like murder that is not merely an act of impulse or malevolence but an assertion of his will to defy the oppressive system and break free. The idea of being a “man,” as delineated by Sartre, is closely linked to the freedom and responsibility of making choices. This resonates through the actions of Balram who constantly makes a conscious choice to become a “man,” even if it means robbing and killing a richer man: “Man makes himself...he makes himself by choosing” (Sartre 46). Balram’s desire to “live like a man” through murder reflects his longing for self-determination and autonomy. However, it also highlights his internal struggle with the weight of responsibility and the potential moral consequences of this action. By taking this course of action, he inadvertently dooms his family. A week later, he reads a tragic incident reported in the newspaper wherein a family of 17 individuals was brutally killed in his village. He suspects that the Storks may have killed his entire family back in Laxmangarh. Despite this disturbing news, he consciously chooses to disregard it, and instead directs his focus on

advancing his own prospects. Viewing Ashok as the epitome of a true man, he adopts Ashok Sharma's name to start a new life after murdering him. At the end of the novel, he fully embodies the persona and identity of a man he killed. Instead of seeing himself as a wrongdoer to his ex-employers, he embraces responsibility and ownership for the actions of his current employees. He owns a taxi company (bought from the seven hundred thousand rupees he stole from the Storks). Balram shows up to take accountability when one of his twenty-six Toyota Qualis drivers accidentally hits a cyclist, resulting in the cyclist's death on the spot. In the face of the victim's grieving parents, he takes full responsibility stating, "the fault is mine, not the driver's" (Adiga 185). Through this incident, he emphasises his commitment to being a responsible and caring employer, determined to protect his staff, a contrast to his former employers, whom he believes were less considerate.

Balram sheds light on the intricate societal hierarchy where survival seems to entail a dog-eat-dog existence. In a somewhat disturbing manner, Balram underscores the prevalent belief that those at the apex of the social ladder, have invariably resorted to acts of violence or subjugation to ascend to their positions of power. He contends that every person who claims the status of a "man" in the societal hierarchy, has, at some point, engaged in the act of taking another life to reach his position. Consequently, he justifies the necessity of his own action—committing the murder of Mr. Ashok, his employer—to assert his own manhood and seek a path to personal freedom: "All I wanted was the chance to be a man - and for that, one murder was enough" (Adiga 149). The act of killing Mr. Ashok transcends the notion of a mere crime, transforming it into an embodiment of freedom, authenticity, and personal responsibility. Balram's choice to resort to murder raises ethical questions about the value of life and the boundaries of personal freedom in the face of moral obligations. By seeing murder as a path to autonomy without acknowledging the moral implications, he overlooks the real nature of his choices and the potential harm they may inflict on others.

### **Conclusion**

Through the exhaustive analysis of Balram Halwai, this research presents a detailed exploration of societal expectations, individual autonomy, and the pursuit of masculinity. The examination of masculinity highlights the dynamic interplay of patriarchy, traumatic loss, and the quest for freedom. Balram's aspiration to "live like a man" becomes a central theme entwined with the burdens of responsibility and moral consequences. His transformative act of murder is intricately linked with his pursuit of freedom and personal agency, challenges ethical boundaries, and prompts reflection on the intricate relationship between personal freedom and moral responsibility. In essence, *The White Tiger* transcends Balram's individual journey, and



offers a sharp commentary on broader societal constructs shaping masculinity. Balram's escape from the "Rooster Coop" can be read as a metaphor for the universal struggle against societal constraints, fostering critical reflection on the intricate dynamics of masculinity that transcend cultural boundaries. The findings help develop a deeper understanding of complexities surrounding gender representation in contemporary literature and highlight the importance of understanding the intricate patterns of masculinity and power dynamics in patriarchal societies.

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