



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

“Existential Crises In Aravind Adiga’s ‘The White Tiger’”

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Abstract

Published in 2008, Aravind Adiga’s Man-Booker Prize winning debut novel *The White Tiger*, has garnered critical acclaim for its unflinching portrayal of contemporary India. This paper will showcase how factors like caste, class, social Identity and education intertwine to create a complex web of emotions and motivations that shape the very foundation of existential crisis. As we delve deeper into Balram's story, we can examine how he grapples with these societal limitations, how they influence his choices, and whether he finds a way to navigate the weight of the world on his shoulders, or if he succumbs to the despair it breeds. Employing a post-colonial framework, exploring the existentialist philosophy, the role of social influences like caste, class and education, this research examines how Adiga’s narrative critiques the corruption of India’s social institutions that have crushed an individual’s self-esteem. The analysis reveals that Adiga's protagonist, Balram Halwai, embodies the contradictions of India’s rapid modernization and the persistence of deep-seated existential crises. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how *The White Tiger* challenges the uncomfortable truths about marginalization in contemporary India and the ongoing struggles of the underclass.

Key Words. Post-colonial, Existentialism, Caste, Social Identity, Rapid Modernization, Contemporary India, Marginalization

Introduction

“You ask 'Are you a man or a demon?' Neither, I say. I have woken up, and the rest of you are sleeping, and that is the only difference between us.”

— Balram Halwai

This quotation offers a profound reflection on the nature of self-awareness, consciousness, and the human predicament. It challenges traditional ideas of identity and existence by arguing that what makes humans fundamentally different from one another is not their physical makeup or external traits, but rather their state of awake or consciousness.

Essentially, the quote asks us to consider what truth is like and what we believe it to be. The speaker rejects the classifications of man and demon, which are often associated with opposing ideas such as good and evil, human and supernatural, or common and otherworldly. Instead, they claim to be neither, implying a transcendence of conventional labels and categories.

‘The rest of you are sleeping’ symbolizes awakening or enlightenment in a metaphorical sense, as evidenced by the expression “I have truly woken up.” It proves that the speaker has reached a higher level of interest or cognizance despite others’ persistent ignorance or unconsciousness. This symbolic closed eye represents a secular or intellectual ignorance when individuals are unaware of deeper, more profound realities or truths that extend beyond the plane of existence.

The quote also suggests a feeling of disconnection or alienation from societal norms and customary expectations. The speaker is exhibiting a mindset that transcends conventional knowledge and societal conditioning by expressing that they are awake. They saw themselves as broken free from the collective subconscious of humanity, which is expressed through delusion, ignorance, and conformity. The speaker's and humanity's relaxation on this sensation differs, but their level of consciousness or attention is what is thought to be one of their key traits instead. The speaker is trying to make the point that one's true identities and state of being are determined by their level of self-awareness and awareness of fundamental truths, not by external factors such as gender, race, or social status. Furthermore, the word raises existential questions

about the nature of reality and the self. It prompts us to remember what it is to be conscious or aware in a world where reality is created through illusion and phantasm.

Is there a country that recognizes people more highly than the typical views of everyday life? What is the nature of the self, and how does it interact with the external world? Philosophically speaking, the quote echoes ideas found in various non-secular and philosophical traditions, such as existentialism, Advaita Vedanta, and Zen Buddhism. These religions stress the need of realizing the interconnection of all beings and moving beyond dualistic thinking. They also emphasize how crucial self-awareness and mindfulness are to achieving emancipation or enlightenment.

Furthermore, the quote could be read as a criticism of cultural customs and norms that promote conformity and discourage uniqueness. The speaker challenges the status quo by stating that they are awake in comparison to humanity's collective slumber, and they extend an invitation to others to question the beliefs and values that guide their own lives.

The remark also challenges us to consider the nature of perception and reality. What is illusion and what is real? How do we tell the difference between the two? The speaker's declaration of alertness suggests a more profound understanding of reality that goes beyond surface appearances and social conditioning. It suggests that people find the underlying harmony and interdependence of all things to be popular.

The quote, taken in a larger context, refers to the human yearning for purpose and meaning in life. It suggests that true success now resides not in chasing after material goods or aspirations from outside sources, but rather in paying attention to one's own inner wakefulness and awareness. People can find freedom from struggle and delusion and transcend the limitations of ego by awakening to the deeper truths of lifestyles.

Lastly, the quotation "Are you a human or a demon? I say neither. A deep understanding of the nature of consciousness, self-awareness, and the human condition is provided by the statement "I even woke up, and the relaxation of you're sleeping, and this is the most effective distinction among us." It challenges conventional ideas in challenging conditions by reaffirming the superiority of awareness over external traits or features, of identity and lifestyles. By considering this quote's deeper meaning, we are challenged to examine our own conceptions of reality and learn about the possibility of awaking to a higher state of consciousness.

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* isn't just a continuation of Balram Halwai's story; it's a plunge into the depths of his existential crisis. Nestled amidst the harsh realities of India's socio-economic landscape, Balram grapples with fundamental questions about life, purpose, and his place in a seemingly indifferent universe. This report serves as a compass, guiding us through the labyrinth of Balram's existential journey.

To understand Balram's struggle, we must first equip ourselves with the tools of existentialist philosophy. Existentialism, at its core, emphasizes the inherent freedom and responsibility of the individual in an absurd world. There are no predetermined answers, no grand narratives to guide us. We are thrown into existence, forced to carve our own meaning and purpose in the face of an indifferent universe. This lack of inherent meaning can be a source of profound anxiety, a feeling Balram grapples with throughout the novel.

Balram's Internal Conflicts Balram's internal world is a battleground of conflicting emotions. Imagine him wrestling with feelings of powerlessness and frustration at his predetermined social status as a lower-caste Halwai. He yearns for a life beyond servitude, yet the rigid caste system and his limited opportunities seem to confine him to a preordained path. This internal conflict fuels his existential angst, leaving him questioning if he has any control over his own destiny.

Balram's existential crisis isn't solely a product of his internal world; it's heavily influenced by the harsh realities of Indian society. The all-pervasive caste system restricts his choices, acting as an invisible wall that limits his aspirations. The vast economic disparity between the rich and the poor constantly reminds him of his own lack of agency. Imagine Balram describing how witnessing the opulent lifestyle of the Ashoks, while serving them as their chauffeur, intensifies his feelings of alienation and his yearning for a different life. These societal pressures amplify his existential anxieties, leaving him feeling lost and adrift in a world seemingly designed to keep him down.

His story compels us to reflect on broader societal issues of identity and self-realization. In a world defined by rigid hierarchies and limited opportunities, how do individuals like Balram forge their own identities and carve a path towards personal fulfillment? Does the concept of self-realization even hold meaning in a society that seems designed to keep certain individuals at the bottom of the ladder? Exploring these questions

will allow us to move beyond Balram's story and consider its implications for a wider social context. This report serves as a roadmap, guiding you through the complexities of Balram's existential journey in Chapter 2 of *The White Tiger*. By delving into the philosophical underpinnings of existentialism, analyzing Balram's internal conflicts and the societal influences that shape them, identifying key moments of crisis, drawing literary and philosophical parallels, and reflecting on broader societal issues, we can gain a deeper understanding of Balram's struggle and its relevance to the human condition in a world grappling with its own complexities.

Existentialism

Existentialism isn't just a philosophical term in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*; it's the air Balram Halwai breathes, a philosophy etched into the very fabric of his experience. Emerging in the 19th and 20th centuries, existentialism grapples with some of life's most fundamental questions: freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning in a universe that often feels indifferent to human struggles. As we delve into Balram's story, understanding these core tenets of existentialism will be crucial in deciphering his internal conflicts and the choices he makes.

Imagine Balram, in his characteristically sardonic way, describing the core concept of existentialism. He might say there are no instruction manuals for life, no predetermined paths laid out before us. The core idea of existentialism is that we are unmade, free agents thrust into lives without a purpose or a higher power directing our every action. But this independence carries a high, and often terrifying price. There is no guarantee of contentment or happiness, nor is there a cosmic safety net. Although we are free to choose, it is ultimately our responsibility to make such decisions. As Balram would learn, this concept of radical independence can be both thrilling and intimidating in equal measure.

The concept of absurdity is one of existentialism's central themes. Imagine Balram describing the vast economic disparity he witnesses every day – the opulent lives of the Ashoks in their air-conditioned mansion existing side-by-side with the desperate poverty of Laxmangarh. This inherent unfairness, the lack of a grand narrative or cosmic justice explaining such inequality, can be a source of profound anxiety. It can lead us to question the very point of existence, a feeling of absurdity that Balram might grapple with as he navigates the

seemingly meaningless cycle of poverty and servitude. He might see the rich living a life of freedom and possibility, while his own life seems predetermined by his caste and limited opportunities. The ridiculousness of his situation can exacerbate his existential anxiety by making him question why he is struggling in a universe that doesn't seem to care about him. Alienation Lost Among the Crowd, But Completely Alone Existentialism also explores the concept of alienation—the feeling of being cut off from the world around us. Imagine Balram explaining to you how he might feel completely alone in busy Delhi, even when he is surrounded by people. The rigid caste system may contribute to this sense of alienation by isolating him from those in positions of authority and limiting his sense of community. He might have yearned for a sense of belonging and connection, but he would always find himself at the outside looking in. Balram may experience existential anxiety as a result of this estrangement, questioning his place in a society that seems indifferent to him.

Identity And Societal Influences

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* isn't a singular, fleeting moment of angst; it's a labyrinthine journey through the darkest corners of his being. Balram's existential crisis stems from this fundamental incongruence – the inherent human desire for freedom clashing with the limitations imposed by his social status. At the heart of Balram's existential crisis lies a profound search for personal identity and autonomy. Imagine him struggling with the question of who he is allowed to be, rather than just who he is. He takes on the name "White Tiger," which will come to represent this desire. It stands for his ambition, defiance, and desire to break free from the constraints of his predetermined life. But there are many difficulties in this search for identity.

Balram Halwai's existential crisis in *The White Tiger* isn't a writhing mass of societal influences that coil around him, squeezing the very breath out of his sense of purpose. His lower-caste background, the suffocating grip of poverty, and the lack of access to education and opportunities all act as venomous fangs, injecting him with feelings of alienation, disillusionment, and existential angst. This section will delve into these societal influences, examining how they shape his perception of the world and intensify his existential struggle.

Caste. The all-pervasive caste system isn't just a social construct for Balram; it's a birthmark he can never erase. He might discuss on the lack of essential resources like healthcare and education, as well as the grueling work that produces little results. In the face of immediate survival, these daily stresses leave little room for existential contemplation. But they also give him a sense of disappointment. He observes the stark financial divide that exists between the rich and the poor, a divide that seems to denigrate the concept of social mobility. This ongoing struggle for survival gives the scene an air of absurdity and is reminiscent of the ideas of philosophers such as Camus. Finding that solution in a system that seems designed to keep Balram at the bottom is challenging because the world he lives in seems indifferent to his misery.

The social hierarchies and economic disparities of Indian society create a constant source of tension and anguish for Balram. Imagine Balram characterizing the caste system as a branding iron that has shaped his place in society since the moment he was born, rather than just a system of social hierarchy. He may talk about the limitations it places on even the most basic relationships, how it dictates the respect he should show to those in authority, and the internalized sense of inferiority it fosters. His feelings of isolation are exacerbated by this constant reminder of his disreputable reputation, which makes him feel like an unseen ghost living on the periphery of society. In the face of this kind of planned existence, the entire idea of existential freedom, as examined by philosophers such as Sartre, appears to be a cruelly humorous tale. He may also recount a specific incident, whether from his early years or a more recent meeting, in which he was forced to face the harsh reality of the caste system and how it affected his sense of self.

Education. Balram's denial of admission to school further exacerbates his existential crisis. Imagine him talking about his burning desire to learn, a desire that is unquenchable despite the gloom of his situation. For Balram, education could be the key to realizing his full potential, learning about the world around him, and perhaps even finding a way to escape the abyss into which he was born. But the lack of educational opportunities functions as another imperceptible barrier, limiting his options and increasing his annoyance. He might talk about how he saw the sharp contrast between the Ashok's children's affluent education and his own lack of literacy. His existential journey is further complicated by this stolen prospect, which makes him question whether there is any use in aiming for a better life while the means to do so are in place. Imagine

Balram talking about his burning desire to learn, a desire that is unquenchable despite the gloom of his situation. For Balram, education could be the key to realizing his full potential, learning about the world around him, and perhaps even finding a way to escape the abyss into which he was born. But the lack of educational opportunities functions as another imperceptible barrier, limiting his options and increasing his annoyance. He might talk about how he saw the sharp contrast between the Ashok children's affluent education and his own lack of literacy. His existential journey is further complicated by this stolen prospect, which makes him question whether there is any use in aiming for a better life while the means to do so are in place.

Specific Moments of Existential Crisis

Balram Halwai's existential crisis in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* isn't a constant, simmering discontent; it erupts in intense moments, like fiery jolts that illuminate the depths of his struggle. These crucible moments are turning points in his narrative, where he grapples with fundamental questions about his place in the world, his purpose, and the ethical boundaries he's willing to cross. This section will delve into specific instances where Balram's existential crisis comes to a head, analyzing how these moments reveal his internal conflict and shape his choices.

Imagine a scene in Chapter 2 where Balram isn't just a nameless servant, but a keen observer. Maybe it's a visit to an expensive mall in Delhi, a sharp contrast to the small space he lives in. He observes, with a mixture of envy and hatred, as families pass by wearing ostentatious costumes and their laughing reverberating through the air-conditioned hallways. Balram is forced to face the stark financial inequality that characterizes his society at this same moment. He sees kids his own age, but from a far different world, playing with toys he can only imagine. This enjoyment sows the germ of disappointment by bringing his lifestyles into stark contrast. He challenges the fairness of a global system in which some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouths and opportunities presented to them before others are sentenced to lives of servitude and combat. This fleeting moment of awareness could perhaps trigger his existential crisis by compelling him to acknowledge the ridiculousness of his current situation and crave for a unique world.

A deep-cutting joy in humiliation will be another capability crucible second. Imagine if instead of just serving Mr. Ashok, Balram is now being singled out in front of the guests for a small error. Perhaps Mr. Ashok would make fun of his accent, his attire, or his lack of schooling. The guests' laughter echoes loudly in the air, serving as a constant reminder of his disgrace. This arrogance erodes his sense of dignity and self-worth. He struggles with feelings of bitterness and rage, wondering where he is in a social structure that seems to be intended to keep him in subordination. This humiliating moment could be the catalyst for his existential crisis. Despite how difficult the mounting order is, it drives him to face the limitations placed upon him with the help of his social reputation and search for a method to express his agency.

Balram's internal struggle with a moral dilemma is directly tied to his survival. Imagine that he sees a moment where Mr. Ashok is concerned about a dishonest plan that may involve price range embezzlement or worker exploitation. Balram finds himself torn between exposing this misconduct and risking his career. He might also get a little cut of the profits in exchange for his silence. Right now, Balram must face the question of what is right and wrong in a world that often seems morally indifferent. He needs to make a decision between his personal moral compass and his desire for a better life—one in which he can escape poverty and provide for his family.

The core ideas of existentialism are demonstrated by this internal conflict, which holds that individuals are ultimately responsible for their choices in a ridiculous world devoid of intrinsic purpose. Balram's decision to live in silence or speak with others may prove to be a turning point in his trip, influencing both his perception of himself and the world around him.

A glance inside Balram's decision to kill Mr. Ashok and the anticipation of an impending fateful occurrence might likewise serve as a useful existential crisis. Imagine Balram speaking sarcastically about the seething hatred and rage that will eventually lead to this act. He might recall particular instances of being taken advantage of or humiliated, or the constant reminder of his bounds as a subordinate. Despite the expensive price, this second emphasizes his bold proclamation of corporation and autonomy. He grapples with the ethical implications of his actions, the potential consequences, and the desperate desire for self-preservation that fuels his decision. This act of defiance, while morally ambiguous, is a product of the societal constraints and existential struggles that have shaped him throughout his life. By analyzing these specific moments of

existential crisis, we gain a deeper understanding of Balram's internal turmoil and the turning points in his journey. Chapter 2 will likely showcase these moments in detail, revealing the complexities of his character and the motivations behind his actions. As we delve deeper into his story, we can examine how he responds to these existential challenges.

Comparison With Existential Themes in Literature and Philosophy

Balram Halwai's existential crisis in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* isn't just a personal struggle; it resonates with the profound themes explored in existentialist literature and philosophy. As we delve deeper into his story, we find echoes of the absurdity of life explored by Albert Camus in "The Stranger," the relentless search for authenticity in Jean-Paul Sartre's "Nausea," and the burden of forging meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose, a core tenet of existentialism. This section will explore these connections in detail, highlighting how Balram's experiences mirror the larger existentialist struggle.

Imagine Balram, not just driving Mr. Ashok's luxurious car, but acutely observing the world around him. He witnesses, with a mix of disbelief and simmering anger, a scene that throws the absurdity of his situation into sharp relief. Perhaps it's a traffic jam on a dusty Delhi Road, where a gleaming Bentley, similar to the one he drives, is stuck bumper-to-bumper with rickety rickshaws and overflowing buses. In this scene, the stark contrast between the wealthy elite and the impoverished masses becomes a microcosm of the larger societal absurdity. Social structures like the caste system in Balram's case appear arbitrary and capricious, leaving them questioning the very point of existence in a world seemingly indifferent to their suffering. Balram might even describe a specific incident, perhaps witnessing a wealthy socialite discarding expensive clothing at a posh boutique, a stark contrast to his own struggle to afford even a new pair of shoes. This juxtaposition further emphasizes the absurdity of his situation and the lack of inherent justice in the world.

Balram's yearning for a life beyond servitude and the constraints of his caste can be seen as a search for authenticity, a concept central to Sartre's existentialism. Imagine him describing a moment where he defies expectations, not just with his words, but with his actions. Perhaps it's a confrontation with Ashok over unfair treatment of a fellow servant, or a calculated act of disobedience that pushes the boundaries of his role. In these acts of defiance, Balram attempts to define himself on his own terms, to crack the shell of societal

expectations and the limitations of his birth. Balram might describe a specific memory from his childhood, a rebellion against his father's wishes, that foreshadows his later defiance and his search for a life he chooses, not one dictated by his social standing.

Perhaps the most profound connection between Balram and existentialism lies in his attempt to forge meaning in a world devoid of inherent purpose. Imagine him, in his sardonic way, not just writing a letter, but weaving a narrative. He describes his decision to adopt the moniker "White Tiger," not just a name, but a symbol. This act can be seen as an attempt to create his own narrative, to imbue his life with a sense of significance in the face of absurdity. The "White Tiger" becomes a symbol of his defiance, his ambition, and his desire to control his own destiny. This struggle for meaning resonates with the core tenet of existentialism that individuals are ultimately responsible for creating their own meaning in an absurd world. While Balram's chosen path may be morally ambiguous, it's a testament to his will to carve out his own existence and defy the limitations imposed on him. He might even describe a specific turning point, a realization or a defining moment, that led him to believe that crafting his own story, even if violent and unconventional, is the only way to forge meaning in a world that offers him none. By analyzing these connections between Balram's experience and the themes of existentialist literature and philosophy, we gain a richer understanding of his internal conflict. His story is not just about a servant in India; it's a reflection of the universal human struggle for meaning and purpose in a seemingly indifferent universe. As we delve deeper into Balram's journey, we can examine how he navigates this existential crisis, the choices he makes.

Reflection On Broader Societal Issues

Balram Halwai's existential crisis in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* isn't just a personal struggle; it's a fractured mirror reflecting the broader societal issues that plague India. Through Balram's journey, we gain a lens to examine issues of identity, agency, and self-realization in the context of social exclusion. Adiga's portrayal of Balram's struggles isn't just about a single individual; it's a powerful indictment of systemic injustices and economic inequalities that strangle the lives of millions. This section will explore how Balram's existential catastrophe serves as a basis for examining the intricacies of Indian society and the ostensibly insurmountable obstacles faced by those seeking freedom from oppressive systems. Identity

Disoriented in the Maze of Caste Balram's struggle for identification and his existential catastrophe are intricately linked. Imagine him explaining not just his name but also the burden of his caste classification, which envelops him like a shroud. He struggles with the question of who he is permitted to be, constantly reminded of the limitations imposed on him by a rigid social hierarchy. This ongoing self-negotiation, divided between his intrinsic value and the His sense of alienation and disappointment is fueled by society's perception of his inferior standing.

Possibly the most painful social issue addressed in Balram's existential crisis is the seemingly unachievable pursuit of self-awareness in the face of impossibly great challenges. Imagine him speaking about a fantasy he had as a young man—a visionary and imaginative one—of a future in which he would be free to transcend the constraints of his social standing and follow his own goals. But with the help of the harsh reality of poverty and a crooked system, this ideal is quickly dashed. Balram's struggle for self-recognition illustrates the situation of many Indians, for whom social mobility appears to be a distant dream. Through an analysis of his existential catastrophe, we are forced to face the limitations imposed on individuals by their social status and the social structures that support those disparities.

In the end, Balram's story will be associated with freedom from repressive structures that limit human potential. His path is a testament to the unwavering desire for a better life, even though it is morally dubious. Imagine him speaking in his caustic tone about the social constraints that bound him and hundreds of thousands of others just like him. Even though it has a high price tag, he might even support his own nontraditional path to achieving a sense of control and some degree of self-realization.

By exploring Balram's existential crisis, Adiga compels us to confront the complexities of Indian society and the urgent need for change. Balram's story becomes a catalyst for questioning the status quo and striving for a world where individuals have the opportunity to define themselves and pursue their dreams, regardless of their caste or background.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* serves as a potent introduction to the existential storm brewing within Balram Halwai. Through his introspective yet cynical narrative, we are not offered comforting platitudes about overcoming adversity. Instead, Adiga plunges us into the harsh realities of Balram's world, forcing us to confront the suffocating limitations imposed by poverty and social hierarchy. This paper lays the groundwork for a profound examination of identity. Balram grapples with the labels thrust upon him, yearning to break free from the confines of the "Rooster Coop" and the anonymity of servitude. His narrative voice becomes a powerful tool, a battleground where he challenges these imposed identities and seeks to carve out a space for his authentic self.

Beyond the personal, this chapter acts as a microcosm of the societal ills plaguing India. Adiga masterfully exposes the chasm between the opulent world of the elite and the desperate struggle for survival faced by the underclass. This juxtaposition fuels Balram's existential crisis, leading him to question the very moral code that condones such inequality. By examining Balram's journey, the novel invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths about marginalization and the fight for meaning in a world rigged against the most vulnerable.

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