



Caste and Class: A Comparative Study of Social Marginalisation in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Aravind Adi ga's *the White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersecting themes of caste, class, and social marginalisation in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Through a comparative approach, the study analyses how both texts reveal the entrenched hierarchies and discriminatory practices that shape the lives of their protagonists. Valmiki's autobiographical account offers an insider's view of Dalit oppression in post-independence India, while Adiga's novel examines the dark underbelly of India's economic liberalisation through the perspective of a lower-class protagonist. By drawing on textual evidence and scholarly analysis, the paper investigates the strategies of resistance and self-assertion employed by both protagonists within exploitative systems. The research further discusses the implications of these narratives for understanding contemporary caste and class dynamics and critiques the limitations of social mobility in a deeply stratified society. Ultimately, the paper argues that both *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* operate as counter-narratives that challenge dominant discourses and contribute to the broader project of social justice and representation.

Keywords: caste, class, marginalisation, resistance, Dalit literature, social mobility

1. INTRODUCTION

Caste and class have long defined the social fabric of the Indian subcontinent, dictating not only economic opportunities but also shaping personal identity and access to power. The exploration of these forces in literature serves as a crucial means of understanding, critiquing, and resisting entrenched systems of oppression. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* are two seminal texts that foreground the lived experiences of those situated at the margins of Indian society.

Joothan (1997), an autobiographical account by a Dalit writer, provides an unvarnished glimpse into the humiliations and deprivations endured by the Dalit community. Valmiki's narrative is not just a personal story but a social document that exposes the persistent realities of caste-based exclusion and the internalised trauma it inflicts. In contrast, Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), set in contemporary India, employs fiction to examine class mobility amidst the backdrop of rapid economic change. Through the

journey of Balram Halwai, the novel interrogates the myth of the Indian dream and the costs of breaking free from one's prescribed social position.

Despite differences in genre and historical context, both works converge in their commitment to giving voice to the subaltern, documenting the strategies of survival and subversion employed by their protagonists. This paper undertakes a comparative study of *Joothan* and *The White Tiger*, arguing that both texts not only expose the mechanisms of oppression but also illuminate the complexities of resistance and agency in the struggle for dignity and selfhood.

2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

The rationale for this comparative study is rooted in the urgent need to interrogate the continued relevance of caste and class hierarchies in modern Indian society. While *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* have individually garnered critical attention, few studies explore the intersection of their narratives or analyse their approaches to social critique side by side. By juxtaposing these texts, the research aims to:

- Examine how both authors deploy narrative strategies to depict marginalisation and resistance.
- Investigate the role of personal testimony versus fictional narrative in shaping readers' perspectives on social justice.
- Assess the implications of these narratives for contemporary debates on caste, class, and mobility. The objective is to contribute to the growing field of Dalit and postcolonial studies by highlighting how literature can function as both a mirror and a catalyst for social change.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly engagement with *Joothan* often highlights its role as a foundational text in Dalit literature, notable for its raw depiction of everyday humiliations and its call for collective resistance (Kumar, 2004; Rege, 2013). Gopal Guru (2001) asserts that Dalit autobiographies like *Joothan* "disrupt the silence imposed by caste society and challenge the monopoly of upper-caste narratives" (45). By contrast, *The White Tiger* has been examined through the lens of postcolonial critique, with scholars such as John C. Hawley (2009) arguing that Adiga's novel "satirizes the optimism of neoliberal India by exposing the realities of those left behind" (102).

Comparative studies, though rare, suggest that both texts foreground the importance of self-narration as a tool of subaltern agency (Singh, 2018). Critics have also noted that while Valmiki's work is rooted in lived experience, Adiga's fiction adopts a more allegorical approach, using irony and dark humour to critique social structures (Mukherjee, 2010). This paper builds on these insights, seeking to bridge the gap between Dalit autobiographical writing and postcolonial fiction.

4. METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This research adopts a qualitative, comparative literary analysis, drawing on close reading of primary texts and engagement with critical scholarship. Key passages from *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* are examined to uncover thematic parallels and divergences in their treatment of marginalisation, resistance, and mobility. The study incorporates textual quotations with page references and critically engages with both primary sources and secondary literature to support its arguments. The research is interpretive and analytical in nature, aiming to generate insights relevant to Dalit, caste, and postcolonial studies.

5. DISCUSSION

Caste, Class, and the Politics of Marginality

Both *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* serve as powerful social documents, exposing the complex entanglement of caste and class in shaping the lives of the marginalised in India. Omprakash Valmiki's narrative is not merely a recollection of personal suffering but a testimony that reflects the collective pain

of Dalit communities. By stating, “The pain of untouchability, the insult, the deprivation—these are not stories, they are experiences that have seeped into our very bones” (*Joothan*, 35), Valmiki emphasises that caste-based marginalisation is not an abstract concept but a lived, embodied experience. His account details how every aspect of daily life—education, labour, food, and even social gestures—is marked by exclusion and degradation. The repeated humiliation and segregation endured by Dalits foster a sense of internalised trauma, reinforcing the myth of impurity and social inferiority.

On the other hand, Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* shifts the focus to class while retaining caste as a silent undercurrent. Balram Halwai’s journey underscores how class mobility is rendered almost impossible within a system rigged in favour of the elite. His observation, “The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy” (*The White Tiger*, 173), reveals how the upper classes depend on the servitude of the underclass while simultaneously dehumanising and exploiting them. Adiga’s novel illustrates how class stratification overlaps with, and is often reinforced by, caste identity, creating insurmountable barriers for those at the bottom.

Both texts thus highlight that the politics of marginality—defined by both caste and class—is not only a question of economic deprivation but also of social recognition, dignity, and psychological well-being. By centring the voices of the marginalised, Valmiki and Adiga compel readers to confront the deep-rooted hierarchies that continue to shape Indian society.

Strategies of Resistance and Assertion

The strategies of resistance adopted by the protagonists of *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* reveal the diverse ways in which individuals can challenge oppressive social structures. For Omprakash Valmiki, resistance emerges most powerfully through the act of narration. By telling his story, Valmiki reclaims agency not only for himself but for an entire community silenced by generations of caste oppression. His declaration, “I want to write so that nobody should have to live a life like mine again” (*Joothan*, 119), encapsulates the transformative intent behind Dalit literature. Writing becomes an act of self-assertion—a means to articulate pain, demand justice, and inspire collective consciousness among the oppressed.

Valmiki’s resistance is also evident in his everyday acts of defiance. Despite being forced into degrading work, he refuses to accept the menial tasks assigned solely on the basis of caste. His pursuit of education, even in the face of relentless discrimination, becomes a form of protest against the systemic denial of opportunity. Valmiki’s narrative is full of moments where he challenges the status quo—rejecting the idea that his identity should be defined by his birth and insisting on his right to dignity and self-worth. Through such actions, Valmiki demonstrates that resistance need not always be dramatic or violent; it can also be found in small, persistent acts of self-affirmation and refusal.

In stark contrast, Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger* embodies a far more morally ambiguous and pragmatic mode of resistance. Trapped in what he calls the “Rooster Coop,” Balram recognizes that the system will never allow true mobility to those at the bottom. His decision to resort to deception and, ultimately, murder is rationalized as a necessary rebellion, “To break the law of his land—to murder and rob—was to break free from the Rooster Coop that kept millions like him in servitude” (*The White Tiger*, 282). This underscores the ethical dilemmas faced by subalterns who are forced to choose between complicity and criminality. For Balram, self-assertion comes at the cost of moral innocence, reflecting the brutal choices available to those seeking liberation within a corrupt and indifferent society. His self-styling as a “white tiger”—a creature that breaks the mould—serves as an allegory for exceptional individuals who manage, by whatever means necessary, to escape systemic bondage.

Together, the narratives of Valmiki and Balram offer a spectrum of resistance: one rooted in collective testimony and persistent defiance, the other in radical, sometimes violent self-assertion. Both strategies expose the profound costs and complex moral terrain of challenging deeply entrenched hierarchies.

Throughout the evolution of Dalit literature, foundational texts such as Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* have set the stage for later works like *Joothan*. As Sanjay Kumar observes, "*Gulamgiri* is not only a literary work but also serves as the first manifesto of Dalit rights in India, articulating the struggles of the oppressed caste in a sociopolitical framework" (Kumar, 2025). Kumar's analysis further underscores the transformative power of Dalit narratives, arguing that "the role of literature is pivotal in fostering awareness and understanding of caste issues in Indian society" (Kumar, 2025). This theoretical backdrop amplifies the significance of *Joothan* as a product of the same tradition of resistance literature. Valmiki's insistence—"I want to write so that nobody should have to live a life like mine again" (*Joothan*, 119)—mirrors Phule's call for social justice and collective emancipation. Both texts, in Kumar's words, "articulate the struggles of the oppressed in a manner that is both personal and political, challenging dominant discourses and advocating for equality" (Kumar, 2025).

Education as Emancipation

In both *Joothan* and *The White Tiger*, education emerges as a crucial, if fraught, pathway toward liberation for those at society's margins. For Omprakash Valmiki, formal education represents the hope of transcending the limitations imposed by caste. However, his school experience is marked by cruelty, exclusion, and systemic bias. The passage, "When I went to school, they made me sit away from the others. The teacher would not touch my books. I was not allowed to drink water from the same vessel... Still, I persisted, because education was the only way out" (*Joothan*, 52), illustrates the manifold challenges facing Dalit students. Beyond the curriculum, Valmiki must navigate a hostile environment where even the basic act of learning is policed by caste boundaries. Despite this, his unwavering commitment to education becomes a profound form of resistance, affirming the transformative potential of knowledge to challenge oppression.

For **Balram Halwai** in *The White Tiger*, education is less about institutional learning and more about adapting to the realities of a rapidly changing world. His assertion, "I am a self-taught entrepreneur. That's the only kind we have in India" (*The White Tiger*, 11), highlights the marginalisation of the poor from mainstream educational opportunities. Balram's learning is pragmatic, drawn from observation, cunning, and survival skills within an unforgiving social and economic system. He becomes adept at reading people and situations, using this "education" to break free from servitude, albeit through morally ambiguous means.

Both texts highlight that while education is a potential tool for emancipation, its promise is continually undermined by entrenched systems of exclusion. Valmiki's perseverance in the face of adversity and Balram's improvisational self-instruction both reveal that true emancipation requires not just access to knowledge, but also the courage to defy the boundaries set by caste and class.

The Limits of Social Mobility

Both *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* offer a sobering assessment of the possibilities and constraints surrounding social mobility for marginalised individuals in India. Despite their protagonists' relentless efforts and, at times, remarkable achievements, both texts ultimately express scepticism about the attainability of genuine liberation from entrenched caste and class structures.

For Omprakash Valmiki, the pursuit of education, employment, and dignity brings tangible progress, but this advancement remains perpetually shadowed by the stigma of caste. His statement, "no matter how much you progress, your caste always follows you" (*Joothan*, p. 96), underscores the inescapability of social categorization. Even as Valmiki moves beyond the physical confines of his village, the psychological and social barriers persist—reminding him and the reader that mobility is not merely a matter of individual effort but is constantly checked by collective prejudice. The legacy of untouchability, institutionalized discrimination, and the subtle yet persistent reminders of his "place" in society

demonstrate that social mobility for Dalits is fraught with limitations and often comes at the cost of ongoing struggle.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai's dramatic ascent from village servant to wealthy entrepreneur seems, at first glance, to embody the myth of modern India's meritocracy. However, Adiga's narrative complicates this trajectory by foregrounding the moral and emotional costs of such a transformation. Balram's rise is enabled by acts of violence, betrayal, and personal reinvention—leaving him alienated from his past and burdened by guilt. His assertion, “The moment you recognise what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave” (*The White Tiger*, 225), signals a psychological awakening, but it is one tinged with ambiguity. The recognition of beauty and possibility is itself a rebellion, yet it does not erase the scars of exploitation or the trauma of those left behind.

Representation and the Ethics of Voice

A crucial distinction between the two works lies in their narrative positioning. Valmiki's *Joothan* is rooted in lived experience and collective testimony, as he affirms, “My story is not just mine; it is the story of millions of Dalits who have been silenced” (*Joothan*, 2). This statement highlights the shared reality of Dalit oppression and the authenticity of his account.

In contrast, Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a fictional narrative voiced by a character from the underclass, constructed by an author who is not himself subaltern. This raises complex questions about voice and representation—can an upper-caste or privileged writer truly capture subaltern experience? While some scholars, such as Guru (2001), express scepticism, Adiga's use of first-person narration nevertheless enables a powerful indictment of systemic injustice, offering insight into the lived realities of India's marginalised even as it acknowledges the limitations of narrative distance.

Counter-Narratives and Social Justice

Joothan and *The White Tiger* operate as potent counter-narratives, challenging the dominant stories that legitimise social hierarchies in India. By giving voice to those historically silenced or misrepresented, these texts expose the deep moral failings of a society structured by caste and class oppression. Valmiki's recollection—“The Joothan we were forced to eat was not just leftover bread, it was a symbol of our status, our untouchability” (*Joothan*, 27)—goes beyond describing material deprivation; it reveals how everyday practices are imbued with symbolic violence, reinforcing the subjugation of Dalits. The act of eating “Joothan” (leftovers) is both a literal and metaphorical reminder of one's place at the bottom of the social order, making visible the insidious ways inequality is reproduced.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga employs the metaphor of the “rooster coop” (175) to critique the psychological mechanisms that sustain exploitation. The rooster coop represents the internalized beliefs and fears that keep the poor compliant, even as they are exploited. By narrating from the perspective of Balram—a servant who ultimately rebels against his masters—Adiga foregrounds the power of personal and collective awakening in challenging injustice.

Scholarly engagement affirms the transformative role of these texts. Sharmila Rege (2013) asserts that *Joothan* “marks a turning point in the articulation of Dalit subjectivity,” highlighting its importance in the wider movement for social justice. John C. Hawley (2009) similarly notes that *The White Tiger* “forces readers to confront the ethical costs of India's economic growth,” demanding not just empathy but critical reflection and action.

Ultimately, both *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* do more than document suffering—they inspire dialogue, resistance, and the ongoing struggle for a more equitable society.

6. FINDINGS

The comparative analysis reveals that *Joothan* and *The White Tiger* offer complementary yet distinct perspectives on social marginalisation in India. Both texts deploy narrative strategies that foreground the resilience and agency of their protagonists, while remaining attentive to the systemic forces that constrain mobility. Valmiki's account is marked by authenticity and collective voice, while Adiga's novel employs irony and allegory. Despite their different genres, both works challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths about caste, class, and the limits of individual agency.

7. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* are powerful interventions in the ongoing debate about caste and class in India. While their protagonists employ different strategies of resistance—one through collective testimony, the other through individual rebellion—both texts lay bare the persistent realities of exclusion and the ethical complexities of survival. The juxtaposition of autobiography and fiction enriches our understanding of how literature can both document and challenge social hierarchies. Ultimately, these works serve not only as mirrors of society's failures but also as calls to action for greater justice and inclusivity. Their enduring relevance lies in their capacity to provoke empathy, critical reflection, and, potentially, social transformation.

8. REFERENCES/Works Cited

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