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Political Corruption and Democratic Disillusionment in the Novels of Aravind Adiga

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Abstract

Political corruption is a dominant and recurring concern in the novels of Aravind Adiga, where he presents a sharp critique of contemporary Indian society and governance. Through works such as *The White Tiger* and *Last Man in Tower*, Adiga exposes how corruption operates at every level of the political system, from electoral manipulation and bureaucratic bribery to police violence and corporate-political nexus. In *The White Tiger*, democratic institutions appear hollow, as politicians exploit caste, poverty, and illiteracy for personal gain, while the poor are denied justice and basic rights. Similarly, *Last Man in Tower* reveals the collusion between politicians and real estate developers, illustrating how money and power override morality, law, and community welfare. Adiga employs satire, irony, and realistic narration to normalize corruption as an everyday reality rather than an exception. His characters often navigate unethical systems to survive, suggesting that political corruption shapes individual choices and social mobility. Overall, Adiga's novels portray politics as deeply compromised, questioning the promise of democracy and exposing the widening gap between India's rich and poor.

Keywords: Political corruption; Aravind Adiga; Indian politics; *The White Tiger*; *Last Man in Tower*; Power and governance; Social inequality.



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Introduction:

Adiga exposes the hollow nature of Indian democracy by showing that elections exist in form but fail to ensure justice or equality for the poor. In *The White Tiger*, voting becomes a ritual manipulated by money, fear, and corruption, offering no real empowerment to marginalized citizens. This contrasts sharply with Aristotle's idea of real democracy, where governance aims at the common good and equality before law. Aristotle argued that democracy degenerates when rulers serve private interests. Adiga's India reflects this degeneration, where democratic structures survive, but ethical purpose and social justice—core to true democracy—are absent.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga powerfully justifies electoral manipulation by portraying how politicians exploit caste loyalties, religious sentiments, poverty, and illiteracy to secure votes. Villagers are coerced or bribed with liquor, money, or false promises, reducing elections to a mechanical ritual rather than a democratic choice. Adiga describes how the poor are often unaware of candidates' policies and are forced to vote under surveillance, exposing the absence of free will. This political reality closely aligns with Machiavelli's ideas in *The Prince*, where he argues that rulers may legitimately use deception, fear, and manipulation to maintain power. Like Machiavelli's pragmatic prince, Adiga's politicians prioritize victory over morality, viewing voters not as citizens but as instruments. Thus, democracy becomes a strategic game of control, where ethical governance is sacrificed for political survival and dominance.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga illustrates corruption through the lens of Political Nexus Theory, which explains how power circulates within an interconnected elite network rather than through democratic accountability. Politicians, bureaucrats, police, and businessmen function as mutually dependent actors, forming a closed system that protects its own interests. Balram's observation that "the police are in the pocket of the rich" reveals how state institutions are captured by economic power. According to political nexus theory, such collusion creates a self-reinforcing structure: politicians require money to win elections, businessmen need policy favors, bureaucrats ensure procedural cover, and police suppress resistance. Each node strengthens the other, leaving no space for justice. Complaints vanish, crimes go unpunished, and the poor remain voiceless. Adiga thus presents democracy as structurally compromised, where governance is driven by elite alliances rather than public good, making corruption systemic rather than accidental.



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In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga foregrounds the marginalization of the poor by showing how democratic institutions systematically exclude them, pushing them into exploitation and enforced silence. Viewed through geopolitics in the age of globalization, India's integration into global markets benefits urban elites while rural populations become surplus labour. Migration from villages to cities, driven by global economic pressures, does not liberate the poor but exposes them to new forms of vulnerability—informal work, humiliation, and invisibility. Balram notes the brutal divide between India's global image and its internal reality:

“There are two India's in this country: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness... millions who live without hope, without voice, without a future.”[56]

This marginalization reflects how globalization reorders power spatially, privileging cities connected to global capital while abandoning rural and migrant populations. Democratic institutions remain spectators, allowing economic forces to dictate human worth, thereby deepening inequality rather than resolving it.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga presents the normalization of corruption as a psychological and social condition produced by constant exposure. Corruption is no longer shocking; it becomes routine, expected, and even necessary for survival. Through Balram's narration, bribery, tax evasion, and abuse of power appear as everyday practices within governance, police work, and business. Applying the concept of desensitization of the mind, repeated exposure to injustice dulls moral response. When people witness corruption daily—at hospitals, schools, courts, and elections—their ethical sensitivity erodes. What once provoked anger gradually becomes background noise.

Balram learns that honesty offers no reward in a system where “every man must have a bribe in his pocket,” and adapts accordingly. This mental numbness allows corruption to reproduce itself without resistance. Adiga thus suggests that the greatest danger is not corruption itself, but society's psychological accommodation of it—where moral outrage fades, and unethical practices become normalized as the logic of governance.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga exposes police and judicial corruption as a core reason for democratic failure. Law enforcement and courts consistently serve the rich, while



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the poor are denied justice, reinforcing structural inequality. This portrayal strongly resonates with B. R. Ambedkar's critique of Indian democracy. Ambedkar warned that "political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy" (Constituent Assembly Debates, 1948). When police and judiciary—two vital pillars of democracy alongside the legislature and executive—are captured by power and money, democracy collapses in spirit.

Adiga shows police acting as private servants of landlords and judges remaining silent spectators, undermining the rule of law. Ambedkar viewed the judiciary as the guardian of constitutional morality; its failure, he argued, would turn democracy into mere formality. Thus, Adiga's narrative illustrates Ambedkar's fear: when democratic institutions protect privilege instead of justice, democracy becomes an instrument of oppression rather than equality.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga demonstrates that capitalism and political power are inseparable, with money functioning as the true source of authority. Political influence is not earned through public service but purchased through wealth, bribery, and control over economic resources. Ministers depend on businessmen for funding, while policies are shaped to protect elite interests. This reflects Terry Eagleton's critique of elite power, where he argues that "the ruling ideas of any age are the ideas of the ruling class" (Eagleton, *Ideology*). Economic elites thus control not only markets but also political narratives and institutions.

Adiga's businessmen-politicians embody this fusion: wealth grants immunity from law and access to state machinery. Democracy becomes a marketplace where power circulates among the rich, excluding the poor entirely. By aligning political authority with capital, Adiga exposes how capitalist dominance converts democratic governance into elite rule, confirming Eagleton's view that ideology masks exploitation by presenting elite control as natural and inevitable.

Conclusion:

Taken together, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* offers a sustained and unsettling critique of Indian democracy in the age of globalization. Through the hollow practice of elections, electoral manipulation, the political-bureaucratic nexus, and the normalization of corruption, Adiga reveals democracy as a structure that functions efficiently for elites while failing the poor. Law enforcement, judiciary, and governance—pillars meant to protect



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equality—are shown as instruments of power, confirming Ambedkar's warning that political democracy without social justice is fragile. Capitalism further intensifies this imbalance, as economic power translates directly into political authority, echoing Eagleton's critique of elite ideology. The marginalization of the poor, migration-driven exploitation, and moral desensitization expose democracy's ethical collapse. Adiga does not merely narrate individual suffering; he diagnoses a systemic failure where democratic forms survive, but democratic spirit is absent. Ultimately, *The White Tiger* urges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about power, inequality, and the urgent need for genuine democratic reform.

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