

## ANALYSIS OF FOUCAULT'S HOMO ECONOMICUS IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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### **Abstract**

*The White Tiger*, an autobiography of a half-baked man, narrates the tale of a country boy, Balram, in retrospect and so eliminates any possibility of manipulation or exaggeration. Balram is eager to tell Mr. Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, about his life, how he grew from a country child to become a businessman and a national figure. He wants to reassure the Chinese Premier that he is narrating his own story of life, as he has experienced it up to this point, and that nothing has been diluted or exaggerated in the process. Balram takes him in confidence saying "I am a self-taught entrepreneur... You will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man." Balram Halwai, Adiga's white tiger, is the ideal homo economicus model. The "homo economicus", According to Foucault, the man of market or the simple consumer is not the sole type of man; he is also the type of man who engages in entrepreneurship and production. Specifically, the present study explores how Balram's success in the globalised economy is driven by the successful execution of his entrepreneurial abilities as well as his ability to channel the wealth he obtains from the murder of his employer into a profitable business venture.

**Key words:** *Homo Economicus, Globalisation, Individualism, Market and Society, Ideal Neoliberal Entrepreneur*

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The term Homo economicus, or economic man, is the portrayal of humans as agents who are consistently rational and narrowly self-interested, and who pursue their subjectively defined ends optimally. It is a word play on Homo sapiens, used in some economic theories and in pedagogy ("Homo Economicus," 2022). The Birth of Biopolitics contains one of Foucault's earliest theories of the *Homo economicus*. The main idea behind Homo Economicus is that a rational person would always act in their own best interest, which would be good for everyone else in the market (Foucault 269-72). Foucault defines *Homo economicus* as an 'entrepreneur of himself': 'being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of his earnings' (Foucault 226). He provides a detailed and comprehensible listing of the essential traits of *Homo economicus* - 'the *Homo economicus* is someone who pursues his own interest'; He is also someone who takes part in the market and acts in his own self-interest, but is still controlled by the 'invisible hand' of market forces. (Foucault 226). Foucault also talks about the double role of the *Homo economicus*, showing that consumption and production in neoliberalism have a lot in common: 'we should think of consumption as an enterprise activity by which the individual, precisely on the basis of the capital he has at his disposal, will produce something that will be his own satisfaction' (Foucault 226). Foucault contends that the logic of neoliberalism views the human body as 'human capital' (Foucault 221), the potential of which the human being is required to explore in order to participate in the expansion of capital. The obligation to assume responsibility for oneself and one's own well-being, as well as act as an active consumer and entrepreneur in the economy, falls entirely on the shoulders of the individual subject.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram has the intention of conveying to Chinese Premier Mr. Jiabao that he has triumphed over extraordinarily challenging obstacles in his life to reach his current position. Balram is a native of the village of Laxmangarh, which at the time was in a deplorable condition. In addition to describing the appalling circumstances that prevail in his hometown, he tells Mr. Jiabao that India is a nation that has 'no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transport, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy or punctuality' (WT 4). The local school attended by Balram was in utter disorder. Balram stopped attending school because he was afraid of the lizards and other animals that could be found there. His father, who had been subjected to torture and beatings at the hands of the tyrannical landlord Stork, had a strong desire to protect his son from a life like that. He

understood that the only way to protect his son from such a life was to provide him with an education. The father, who was uneducated and poor, could not see that such a school was useless. He requested the teacher, 'my whole life I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that son of mine – at least one should live like a man' (WT 30). According to Balram, if the village was a paradise, the school was a paradise within a paradise. Six months' worth of funds had been stolen by the teacher. No one in the village had anything negative to say about the instructor since everyone believed that if they were in the same situation, they too would have acted the same way. The school inspector was just like the teacher. The four sentences were written on the board by the inspector, who then requested a boy to read them. The only person who could read it was Balram. The inspector gave Balram the name 'White Tiger' because it was rare to see a white tiger in the jungle.

However, this White Tiger had to leave school in order to repay the money borrowed from the stork for his cousin's dowry. When Balram's classmates saw the white tiger working at the tea store, they couldn't help but giggle at the sight. Balram's formal schooling had ended, but his true education had begun at the tea store, where he was a good observer and listener. While cleaning and wiping the tables, he would overhear the clients' conversations. Balram had discovered that the drivers were paid one thousand seven hundred rupees. He made the decision to become a driver, but the challenge that he faced was coming up with one hundred rupees, which was the amount that the trainers required. Balram was unhappy and disappointed, but his grandmother, Kusum, agreed to lend him the money if he pledged to repay her. After months of hard work, Balram became a trained driver. Balram went door to door in search of a driving job and ran for days on end without luck. Balram grabbed Stork by the feet, pleaded with him to hire him as a driver, and reminded him that he was from the same village as Balram. Because of his efforts, Balram was able to achieve the required level of success, and he went on to become a driver so that he could observe the behaviour of wealthy people up close. He was so excited about his new opportunities that he was offered a monthly salary of 800 rupees. Mr. Ashok, whose car Balram drives, asks him some questions, which he answers incorrectly. As a result, Mr. Ashok draws the conclusion that Balram is 'half-baked' as a result of this, but Balram accepts the praise and says that he should tell him his life story, which he calls 'The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian' (WT 10). He further adds, 'The story of my upbringing tells how a half-baked fellow is produced' (WT 11).

Balram asks Mr. Jiabao to tell this story of to his friends to let them know how the poor drivers are victimised in India. He further tells Mr. Jiabao that his is not a single isolated case- 'The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse' (WT 170). Balram becomes sad and morose because he would have passed the best period of his life behind bars like other

drivers for no fault of his. He came down to his dingy, mosquito ridden room; nobody came to meet him. Undoubtedly, the struggle, people like Balram have to get through for the basic needs of human existence compels them to revolt against this life of subjugation. So Balram also decided to abandon his place for a better future. But to his utter dismay, the shadowy side of India was not limited to his native Laxmangarh only but for people like him, it extended to the light of metropolitan Delhi and Gurgaon where he moved as a driver to Mr. Ashok.

The mantra to Balram's success lies in his ability to be alone and to stay apart from the crowd. He got a title as 'White Tiger' while he passed in the short span of his school life. Thousands of people go through the oppression that he did, yet it is only Balram who has made it successful in the end. The secret of Balram's success is his individualism. Globalisation has prompted a rise in individualism as people have greater access to information and events outside their communities. Individualism is the freedom to do what we want as independent people and it cannot work in society when structure is controlled by institutions like family, government, law and order. Being christened as 'The White Tiger' in his school, Balram proclaims his presence in the jungle of men. Balram dares to dream of joining the elite class of the society, the hue of the kind of Mr. Ashok, through breaking the shackles of moral, social, religious as a relief from misery, penury and degradation. Balram takes pride in the fact that his father is a rickshaw puller. His father, unlike the other men in the village did not choose to work in the mud of the landlords. He preferred to be on his own and hence become a rickshaw puller. Balram calls his father 'a human beast of burden' (WT 27).

Since Balram started his new job as a driver, his family has insisted that he fulfil their financial obligation to them on a monthly basis by sending them money. He sent mail for barely a few months before stopping. Balram went back to his home town with Mr. Ashok, where his whole family was waiting for him. They say he has forgotten about his family, but they are happy and show him more love and care. He is reminded of his responsibilities by Old Kusum. Because Balram's family had grown while he was away, he was upset with himself for not sending money regularly to support them. There is utter contempt both for the community and the family. Even after he has achieved great success in his career, Balram does not exhibit any interest in being a member of his family, nor does he agree to give financially to his family, which is struggling financially. Additionally, Balram opposes companionship with any other social contact. He learns 'The White Tiger Keeps No Friends' (WT 302) as he internalises one of the extreme self-centeredness and utter indifference in everything that requires being a member of any social organization. His connection with other employers consists, naturally, of exploiting one another and manipulating the other. In addition to this, he disregards the importance of social solidarity with other servants. Balram exploits his opponents' weaknesses. He does not bother to forge an alliance with the other servants of the home; rather, he gets rid of all of

them and establishes himself as the most trusted servant. This apathy will develop into a friendship that transcends the need for material gain.

Balram likens the Indian social order to a 'rooster coop,' arguing that the poor Indians are similar to roosters that have been held in captivity and are prepared for slaughter. 'They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they are next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop' (WT 175). Instead of being enslaved by the coop, Balram preaches and practises breaking free of the coop and taking responsibility for one's own actions. He does not place any reliance on the actions of others to free him, nor does he accept the burden of freeing others. As a self-responsible individual, he accepts sole responsibility for his own destiny and pursues his own goals, even if this requires him to make immoral compromises, such as taking the life of another person. Again, exposing the calculative and cold-blooded nature of his thinking, Balram declares that he will not hesitate to put an end to Dharam's life if the latter tries to rebel against him. So, the self-made entrepreneur is a good example of emotional coldness because his main goal is to make money for himself without any problems.

Foucault says 'homo economicus' is not just a consumer but also an entrepreneur and producer (Foucault 147). Balram's success in the market economy is a direct result of his ability to successfully utilise his business abilities and his capacity to channel the capital he obtains through the murder of his competitors. Therefore, after Balram murdered his employer, he deftly used the stolen money to set up his own company rather than spend it on activities that did not provide fruitful results. As a successful businessman who is able to properly gauge what is best for both himself and his profits, Balram also stands out for making the most appropriate decisions possible. This is a sign of a society where the market sets the rules for living and being successful, and where a person's choices are both made in and by the market.

Balram like an ideal neoliberal entrepreneur, who is flexible, multiskilled, mobile able to respond to new demands and situations (Davies 9). Balram as a master entrepreneur, he knows how exactly to exploit the system for his own benefits. Balram tells Jiabao that a new age of Hindi- Cheeni bhai bhai is emerging. And a new Bangalore is rebuilt as new companies are coming up to the city. As he notices the new buildings coming up, he decides to deal in real estate. What he would buy today, would get him fortune in future. He proudly says, 'I am always a man who sees tomorrow.' He purchases buildings which would fetch a lot more from the American buyers. He also thinks that he would start an English Medium school for children full of White Tigers. He also dreams that the school would make him the boss of Bangalore. As much as he is an entrepreneur of financial capital, Balram is also a crafty manager of human capital. As an employer, his relationship with employees is one of extreme professionalism, without any sociability. He says, 'Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. I don't treat them like servants—I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling

them my 'family,' either. They're my employees, I'm their boss, that's all. I make them sign a contract and I sign it too, and both of us must honour that contract. That's all. If they notice the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I keep things clean, they'll go up in life. If they don't, they'll be drivers all their lives. I leave the choice up to them. When the work is done, I kick them out of the office: no chitchat, no cups of coffee' (WT 302).

'His (Balram) philosophy of social mobility based on productive commercial investments embraces, to begin with, a breach of family duty. In his avidity to rise, family bonds, family allegiance and family obligation cease to have any meaning for Balram now' (Want 75). In many respects, Adiga's character, Balram Halwai, exemplifies the 'homo economicus' archetype. His knowledge of self-responsibility, one of the most crucial attributes anticipated of the neoliberal subject, is reflected in him. Balram is fundamentally a self-made man who has accepted responsibility for his own life and has been described as 'a thinking man' and 'an entrepreneur.' (3) He is neither formally educated, meaning that his 'half-baked' (9) education had little to do with his achievement, nor had he inherited a large sum of money that guaranteed his future. Instead, everything that he has accomplished in terms of monetary success is the result of him taking responsibility for himself and transforming himself into an entrepreneur on his own. He is the only person responsible for his accomplishments. So, as he is proud to say, he is an example of self-taught entrepreneurship that was 'born, nurtured and developed' (4) from the ground up.

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