

Balram Halwai and the Limits of Nietzschean Self-Overcoming in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Keba Immanuel*  

Abstract

*This article examines how Balram Halwai seeks freedom in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* through Nietzsche's idea of the Übermensch. It explores whether Balram's break from servitude and rise as an entrepreneur show true self-overcoming and value creation, or if his success still relies on the same systems of control he criticises. The study closely examines Balram's education, the Rooster Coop metaphor, his use of the white tiger identity, and how he justifies murder. Nietzsche's distinction between breaking free from old rules and creating new values serves as the main analytical lens. The findings show that while Balram resists an identity forced on him, gaining wealth or breaking moral rules does not make him a true Übermensch. His letters also show that the story depends on a narrator who wants to justify his own success. The article concludes that the novel reveals the ethical uncertainty of individual escape in an unequal society.*

Keywords: The White Tiger, Aravind Adiga, Friedrich Nietzsche, Übermensch, narrative self-justification, self-overcoming,

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) tells the story of a servant who murders his employer and becomes a successful entrepreneur, raising questions about social mobility. Balram Halwai's journey from Laxmangarh to Bangalore follo

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*Keba Immanuel, PhD Research Scholar, Part-time, (P5449), Assistant Professor of English, Arul Anandar College, Madurai-628617, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai-625021, Tamil Nadu, India.

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follows a familiar path of progress, but the way he achieves it makes us question whether success truly means freedom. “I was looking for the key for years, but the door was always open” (Adiga 54). The novel invites readers to consider how someone gains the power to tell their own story, and how that story might hide the harm done to others.

The basic appeal of a Nietzschean reading lies in Balram’s refusal to accept the identity of the obedient servant. His actions question whether loyalty and family duty operate as freely chosen commitments when material dependence makes refusal dangerous. Nevertheless, rejection alone does not establish a new evaluative position. The central question of this article is therefore how far Balram’s transformation can be understood as self-overcoming, and where the comparison with the *Übermensch* fails. The argument treats the philosophical connection as an interpretive analogy; it does not claim that Adiga deliberately modelled Balram on Nietzsche.

Context and Method

Critical discussions of the novel complicate any straightforward celebration of Balram’s emancipation. Ana Cristina Mendes examines the representation of a dark India within exoticist discourse and the international literary marketplace, including disputes over the authenticity of Balram’s voice. Her account makes the mediation of poverty central to interpretation: the reader encounters a crafted representation whose circulation and reception affect its meaning (Mendes). This approach cautions against using Balram’s division of India into Light and Darkness as an objective social map.

Snehal Shingavi offers a different perspective by locating the novel at the intersection of neoliberal narratives of poverty alleviation and libertarian accounts of individual advancement. His argument questions the assumption that an account of poverty necessarily critiques capitalism (Shingavi). Together, these positions make it necessary to distinguish between exposing oppression and endorsing the successful individual. The present article develops that distinction through Nietzsche’s contrast between breaking inherited commands and creating values. It offers a focused test of the analogy, rather than asserting that Balram’s success proves his philosophical status. This article uses close reading to answer three questions: what duties Balram rejects, how he explains these choices, and what values his actions show. It pays special attention to who is speaking, who is being addressed, the use of metaphors, and how events are explained after the fact. The analysis examines evidence for and against the Nietzschean analogy. The discussion stays within the novel and does not suggest that Balram represents all disadvantaged Indians or should be seen as a role model.

Nietzschean Self-Overcoming and Value Creation

In the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche introduces the *Übermensch* as someone who goes beyond being simply human. The idea focuses on transformation, not on social status. This article uses the German word because

“superman” in English can wrongly suggest physical strength or great power. The main point is how people question old standards of value and find new ways to live (Nietzsche, “Zarathustra’s Prologue,” sec. 3). Nietzsche’s “The Three Metamorphoses” helps us interpret Balram’s journey. The camel carries old burdens, the lion fights authority, and the child represents a fresh start (Kasbekar 2008). Nietzsche makes it clear that gaining freedom, like the lion, is not the same as creating new values, which is the child’s role (Langsam 100-113). So, just resisting is not enough to show true self-overcoming. This also means murder cannot serve as easy proof of transformation; breaking rules and building a new way of life are separate and require different evidence (Nietzsche, “The Three Metamorphoses”). This system is used selectively. It does not equate master morality, the will to power, and the Übermensch, nor does it treat them as interchangeable labels for ambition. Balram’s altered relationship to obedience provides the strongest point of comparison. His continued reliance on wealth and hierarchical advantage tests its limits. The question is whether he changes the standards through which he values life or mainly secures a more advantageous place within standards already imposed by his employers.

Education and the Conditions of Agency

Balram’s early education is not a simple story of support from both parents. His mother is very ill and dies when he is young. His father wants him to learn to read and write and helps him return to school after others bully him. Later, the family takes on debt for a wedding, so Balram leaves school to work in a tea shop. These events show the difference between his father’s hopes and the family’s financial problems (Adiga, “The First Night” 16). They also show that dropping out of school is not just a personal failure.

Balram later learns to drive from a taxi driver and looks for work as a driver. Getting a job in the Stork’s household is a small step up, not a full escape from dependence (Adiga, “The Second Night”). This difference matters to the argument. Learning new skills gives him more options, but at first, it just puts him in another service role. When Balram tells his story later, he makes these chance events sound like proof of his determination. Balram’s education story makes it harder to see him as someone who created himself alone. Family support, debt, work, and job opportunities shape his choices. Considering these factors alongside his ambition shows that the Nietzschean comparison is not simple. We need to see what his transformation really means, not just assume he overcame his limits because he became successful.

The Rooster Coop and the Problem of Escape

Balram’s Rooster Coop metaphor shows how servitude continues even when servants know they are being exploited. He compares the birds’ awareness of slaughter to their inability to escape (Adiga 147-48). This image highlights the difference between seeing danger and being able to resist it. “Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence”

(Adiga 134). In Balram's view, threats to family members mean that disobedience affects more than just the person who rebels. This metaphor gives a better way to talk about agency than just saying social customs block success. It shows how dependence and fear of punishment keep people trapped. From a Nietzschean view, Balram's refusal to obey is like rejecting an old command. But the analogy weakens when escaping means putting others at risk. Leaving the household's shared expectations does not prove he has found a better way to relate to others. Balram's killing of Ashok needs to be seen in this context of uncertainty. The murder lets him get money and escape, but it does not fully justify his actions from a philosophical point of view. The story helps readers understand why Balram feels resentment, but does not ask them to agree with what he does. Both Ashok's role in an unfair system and Balram's guilt are important. If we see the murder as proof that Balram is an *Übermensch*, we are just repeating his own justification instead of examining it.

Exceptional Identity and Narrative Authority

When the school inspector calls Balram a white tiger, it gives him an identity he later uses to explain his life (Adiga 30). At first, the image is about his promise as a student, but as an adult, Balram uses it to describe his ambition. He tells his story in a way that makes his survival seem like proof of the special quality noticed in his childhood. However, just being called a white tiger as a child does not prove that his later actions are justified. The white tiger image clashes with the Rooster Coop. The white tiger represents uniqueness, while the rooster coop shows how many are trapped together. By using both images, Balram can talk about those who stay stuck and the one who escapes. This contrast is key to the novel's uncertain view of freedom. One person's success can highlight how hard it is for most people, but it does not change their situation. So, focusing on being exceptional limits how much Balram's story can inspire real change, even as it makes him stand out (Das & Das, 2025, pp. 52-75).

Balram's letters to Wen Jiabao make the link between experience and truth even more complex. By writing to someone powerful, Balram tries to show he is qualified to talk about business and Indian society. His story is both a confession and a way to claim authority. The way he chooses events, uses strong contrasts, and claims special insight helps him shape how people see his crime and success. Readers should separate Balram's version from the novel's overall message. This storytelling also changes what Light and Darkness mean.

Balram Halwai, the narrator, is both the hero and the product of this story. He was born in a poor village called Laxmangarh, in what he calls 'the Darkness', and it is a world of landlords, debt, and very little hope. By the end of the novel, he is a successful businessman in Bangalore, running his own taxi company. He writes the novel as a series of letters to China's Premier Wen Jiabao, framing his story as a lesson in entrepreneurial survival. The choice of audience is deliberate: it places India and China in competition as rising economies, and it signals that Balram's story is not just personal but national and global. "Balram's act of murder, as well as

the behaviour of the four landlords, termed as animals, is inhuman, unethical, or simply nonsensical (Jenobhar 44).

The contrast can show the real difference between poverty and wealth, but when Balram uses it, it becomes a way to justify his actions. It suggests that becoming rich means becoming enlightened, but this article does not accept that idea. Balram's skill in telling his story is a kind of power, and it leaves the ethics of his freedom open to question.

Entrepreneurship and the Limits of the Analogy

Balram's new transport business shows that his material situation has changed. However, it is unclear whether his values have changed as much. In his story, money, status, and freedom from a boss are still the main signs of success.

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like the one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half hour before falling asleep--all these ideas, half formed and half-digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (Adiga 114)

These goals make sense for someone who has been exploited, but reaching them might just mean moving up in the same system. Shingavi's view on personal advancement shows why we need to look deeper than just the results of Balram's transformation. The novel still retains a productive Nietzschean dimension. Balram refuses to treat the servant's assigned identity as the final definition of his possibilities. He also exposes the coercion that can underlie moral demands for unquestioning loyalty. However, the conceptual distinction developed earlier places a burden on any affirmative identification: the reader would need evidence of value creation that exceeds the acquisition of his former superiors' advantages. The novel's morally compromised success story makes that identification difficult to sustain without qualification (Senthilkumar 5970-5976).

Conclusion

Balram Halwai offers an incomplete and contested analogy to Nietzsche's Übermensch. His refusal of imposed servitude makes self-overcoming a useful interpretive question, but economic mobility and criminal transgression do not answer it. Close attention to his education, the Rooster Coop, and the white tiger identity shows that agency develops within material constraints and is subsequently

reshaped by retrospective narration. His letters seek to convert successful escape into authority over its meaning. The value of the Nietzschean reading lies in distinguishing resistance from value creation. Balram challenges the obligations that bind him, yet his achievement remains entangled with the unequal order from which he escapes. *The White Tiger* thus supports an inquiry into the limits and costs of individual freedom rather than justifying murder or unqualifiedly celebrating the self-made entrepreneur.

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