

Shades of Imperfection: The Anatomy of Flawed Characters in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract: This study appraises how Aravind Adiga crafted Flawed Characters in his book *The White Tiger*, highlighting their role as literary devices that divulge extensive injustices and moral complexities in post-colonial Indian society. It aims to examine how the human moral imperfections of the novel's key characters function not merely as individual traits but as deliberate literary strategies that expose systemic corruption, social inequality, and moral ambiguity. By exploring the characterization of Balram Halwai, the anti-hero and others in terms of psychological realism and social critique, this study illustrates how Adiga undermines established narrative frameworks of heroism and victimhood. Through the development of his deeply imperfect characters, Adiga makes certain that *The White Tiger* is experienced on a visceral level, encouraging readers to evoke strong emotions, stimulate inquiry, and leave a lasting impression. The study also considers how these characterizations serve as a vehicle for interrogating themes of justice, freedom, and intervention in contemporary Indian society. Ultimately, this study positions *The White Tiger* as a character-driven narrative where flawed individuals are central to both the unfolding of conflict and the delivery of social commentary, thereby offering readers to introspect on narrative ethics and literary experience.

Keywords: Anti-hero, flawed characters, moral imperfection, narrative ethics, post-colonial, psychological realism, socio-political dysfunction, visceral level, victimhood.

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Introduction

In the realm of narrative art forms such as a novel, a movie or a play, the storyline plays an extensive role. In fact a well-scripted storyline is the lead hero of any narrative. It keeps the readers or the viewers invested in the plot. Nevertheless, we cannot deny that the nucleus of this storyline, are the characters who make it come alive. While scripting, the writer creates a character with a few traits based on the desires, intentions and conditions, to match the plot. A well-crafted character is born from the writer's vision—shaped by desires, intentions, and circumstances—to serve the needs of the plot. Depending on the narrative purpose, characters may take on roles such as protagonists (with virtuous or flawed traits), antagonists (who challenge or provoke change), or secondary figures (who drive subplots and deepen the narrative layers). The virtues and vices of these characters determine the strength of their roles in the plot. Likewise, the characters who survive till the last with their strong traits, become impactful images. A hero with all virtues is an expected character, but a character with many complexities still wins the reader or viewer's hearts. These complexities of imperfection, infirmities or vulnerabilities in the traits of a character label them as flawed characters. These flawed characters not only imitate the negative characteristics but rather make the reader empathise and reason out the situations and obligations which culled them.

The White Tiger (2008) is one such novel which embodies these shades of imperfection. It is a debut novel from an Indian journalist and author, "Aravind Adiga" It occupies a critical space in contemporary Indian English literature, not only for its daring socio-political critique but also for its unconventional narrative technique built around morally ambiguous characters. Aravind Adiga, in his Booker Prize-winning novel, constructs a narrative which is a provocative exploration of India's suppressed truths that is driven by these morally ambiguous characters or flawed characters, each embodying the paradoxes and crises of modern India. This narrative undermines established moral binaries by centering a deeply imperfect protagonist. This paper explores the anatomy of these flawed characters, examining how their imperfections—far from being merely individual failings—act as both narrative fuel and a mirror to societal dysfunction. These characters catalyse a critique of systemic inequality through psychological realism and social commentary, steeped in black humour and cynicism. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Aristotle's concept of hamartia, postmodern character theory, and social realism, the paper examines how moral ambiguity becomes central to Adiga's storytelling. These flawed characters are shaped by caste oppression, economic disparity, and cultural complexities of post-liberalization India. Adiga leverages character feebleness as

thematic tools to spark moral thinking, scrutiny ethical issues, criticize social systems, and cultivate a liking for gritty, antiheroic realism. By examining moral uncertainty, the juxtaposition of empathy and judgment, this study appraises how Adiga reshapes the imperfect character into a symbol of rationality. The novel employs an epistolary structure, featuring a collection of letters from Balram Halwai to the visiting Chinese Premier, which blurs the boundary between confession and justification.

Likewise, the flawed characters, in the narratives are more realistic and relatable. These characters are relatable as they project multifaceted aspects faced by any human in a society. These characters hypnotize the reader to relate to the situations, deficiencies, struggles and traits encountered by them. This way, the reader is compelled to have a profound connection with the plot. It keeps the reader invested in the plot. The undesirable features like imperfection, infirmities or vulnerabilities in the traits of a flawed character bring a certain richness to the flawed characters and enhance the intricacy of the storyline. The flawed characters generally possess negative traits because of their individual choices and the situations they come across. Their impulsive behaviours, unethical decisions, mental imbalances, immoral actions, and societal misconduct lay the groundwork for the chain of events which twist and propel the story to move forward. These obnoxious characters mask themselves with various flaws and with their dynamism propel the storyline. The moral failings of these characters indirectly focus on the incongruities present in the society.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the significance of flawed characters in 'The White Tiger', the study draws upon a combination of literary theories such as Aristotle's concept of Hamartia which explains how a protagonist's tragic flaw can lead to downfall, relevant in analyzing Balram's choices which make him successful but carries the tag of a murderer and reason for the end of his entire family. Here, hamartia is to mean any kind of flaw, mistake, or limitation—psychological, moral, or even societal—that leads to a character's downfall, not just in Greek tragedies but in contemporary literature and film as well. Adiga's portrayal of characters goes beyond the external plot to expose the moral and emotional cost of survival in a corrupt and unequal society. They are psychologically realistic characters because they are deeply flawed, conflicted, and believable. Adiga's characters spring from the Postmodern Character Theory, which destabilizes the idea of characters as reliable, emotionally coherent individuals. Instead, it presents them as constructs, or cultural products—fluid, unstable, and often self-referential. These characters reflect the uncertainties and complexities of postmodern existence. Jacques Derrida and Fredric Jameson opine that characters do not have fixed meanings and are open to reinterpretation, and serve as non-heroic, self-justifying protagonists as reflections of postcolonial identities.

The Anatomy of Flawed Characters

In Indian English fiction, the inclusion of flawed characters is a common strategic device that helps create relatable, engaging, and complex narratives. In *The White Tiger* novel too, the notable characters are narrative drivers who, with their imperfections, breed the plot and trigger crises by their ambition, animosity, aspirational decay, traditional hierarchy and

repression. Characters such as Balram Halwai, Ashok, Pinky Madam, the Stork, the Mongoose, Kusum, and Vijay are analyzed not as isolated personalities but as relatable and narrative agents. Additionally, a comparative glance at few other flawed figures in Indian English fiction, such as in the works of Rohinton Mistry and Kiran Desai, enriches the contextual framing of Adiga's characters. Omprakash and Ishvar in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* are victims who must compromise ethics to survive. Their minor transgressions expose the impossibility of moral purity in a corrupt system. Sai and Biju in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* also grapple with identity, alienation, and failure. Their indecisiveness and insecurity reflect the postcolonial individual's fractured self. In the *White Tiger*, characters such as Balram Halwai, Ashok, Pinky Madam, the Stork, the Mongoose, Kusum, and Vijay are analyzed not as isolated personalities but as relatable and narrative agents. Balram Halwai, the protagonist, is a deeply flawed yet compelling character.

In "The White Tiger," Balram, the narrator and the protagonist of the novel, is trailed by many other undesirable characters who augment the storyline. These characters through their dispositions and actions portray the complexities, disparities, exploitations challenged in the Indian society. Balram Halwai, a flawed character is nefarious, atypical anti-hero with unethical characteristics, whose mean actions to set himself free from the rooster coop, lead to killing of his family members. Readers awe his actions because he doesn't accept the controlled servitude and holds a strong cynical indignation towards the complexities of Indian society and his own life. Balram, commits social and immoral misdeeds, he murders his master Mr. Ashok, brutally but claims he lacks repentance.

"I rammed the bottle down. The glass at the bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains. It's a good, strong bottle, Johnnie Walker Black-well worth its resale value" (Adiga, 2008, p. 284).

He has no regrets for merciless killing, rather he remarks that the bottle he used it as a weapon, has a resale value. That insensitive was Balram that he lacks remorse to the killings of his family members too. He treads on the path of greed and rapacious success at the cost of corruption and immoral activities. Though it doesn't seem rational, still the readers appreciate his determination and frame it in the name of freedom from social injustice. The greatest flaw in Balram's character is his moral ambiguity. He is ambitious and intelligent, yet his intense ambition blinds him to ethical considerations. He embodies the darker side of the 'self-made man,' willing to sacrifice morality for success. "There are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies" (Adiga, 2008, p. 54). This relentless pursuit reflects the harsh truths experienced by many in a profoundly unequal society, where survival often requires bending or breaking the rules. Balram is not merely a simplistic antagonist; his reflective nature and self-awareness contribute depth to his character. Throughout the novel, Balram exposes systemic corruption—from petty bribery to large-scale political corruption. "The Rooster Coop was doing its work. ... The coop is guarded from the inside" (Adiga, 2008, p. 166). This corruption perpetuates inequality and injustice, making it difficult for the poor to escape their conditions. Balram critiques the glamorized version of India's progress while the majority suffer in slums and villages. Balram's journey involves morally ambiguous

decisions—he commits murder to escape servitude and his moral decay is a byproduct of institutional rot. His individual flaws become tools to diagnose collective dysfunction. This highlights the extreme measures some take due to systemic oppression and the harshness of survival in India's class system. This psychological authenticity makes him relatable, despite his shortcomings. Through a postmodern perspective, Balram's ever-changing identity and contradictions destabilize the concept of a coherent and consistent character. He is both sympathetic and distasteful, a byproduct of a fragmented and morally ambiguous world. Adiga consciously chooses not to represent Balram as a clear villain or hero. Instead, he places him in the intricate gray zones of moral complexity. Balram's voice is charming, sarcastic, and unsettling. His way of telling the story mixes honesty with trickery, making readers feel both sympathy and disgust.

The second influencing character Mr. Ashok, the immediate master of Balram also reveals the shades of flawed character. Freshly America returned, a mild and gentle personality, being the second son of The Stork, gets carried by the family corrupt schemes. He is no less selfish and oblivious to his own snobbery towards people below his social standing. He acts as a teacher mentoring Balram the life of a corrupted Indian. This trait in Mr. Ashok leads to his death in the hands of his own driver Mr. Balram, who states that,

"Yet even if all my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor – even if they throw me in jail and have all the other prisoners dip their beaks into me – even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose – I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat" (Adiga, 2008, p. 320)

This statement proves that Mr. Ashok was a callous character and duly Balram justifies his deed. Ashok, the affluent employer of Balram Halwai, whose shortcomings expose the contradictions within the Indian upper class. The author uses Ashok to show how the privileged classes often pay lip service to reform but continue benefiting from inequality. At first, Ashok seems to embody idealism, appearing to reject the corrupt practices of his family and the oppressive caste system. "We're driving past Gandhi, after just having given a bribe to a minister. It's a fucking joke, isn't it" (Adiga, 2008, p. 115). However, his idealism is eroded by his indecisiveness and inability to act decisively. Rather than effectively confronting the system, he frequently opts for inaction, which enables corruption and injustice to persist. Ashok has the means to resist, but he chooses convenience over conscience. This underscores the rot within the upper class who want change but refuse to sacrifice their comfort. His character is a symbol of elite liberalism without action and illustrates the limitations of idealism within a deeply flawed society. His character is used as a thematic tool, who embodies a moral failure of a system. He gives a clear picture that corruption trickles down to affect every level of society.

The next comes the landlord Thakur Ramdev, the character nick named as "The Stork," is one of the four landlords who own the village Laxmangarh, he owns the river around the village, allows fishermen of the village to have a catch but takes the share of catch from the fishermen and also collects toll from the boatmen crossing the river. He is conceited and a classist. He runs coal business in connivance with the politicians. His character is stained by subornment, dodging taxes and

unscrupulous practices. He dominates and oppresses the weaker section on the name of high social cadre and by using his power dynamics. One of the social stigmas in India is Corruption which runs through the novel through the portrayal of the various characters who appear in it.

One such torch bearer is 'The Mongoose' also known as Mukesh Sir. He is the elder son of the landlord The Stork the elder brother of Mr. Ashok, who is quite opposite. Very shrewd, strict with the servants, carries the DNA of his father. "Driver, don't loiter there! Clean the car" shows that he is authoritative. He always screeches and exploits people especially his servants, just as a Mongoose which is always ready to attack a snake. He is often crafty, a discourteous, cynical and distrustful character, he importunes his younger brother, Ashok to remarry when his wife Pinky leaves him. The Mongoose, is polar opposite of his brother Ashok. Mukesh has no issue in participating in the corruption that his family benefits from and shows no sign of remorse. It is likely that The Stork favors Mukesh over his brother since he is more related in dealing with the family's business affairs compared to his brother who questions them. It is likely that The Stork favors Mukesh over his brother since he is more related in dealing with the family's business affairs compared to his brother who questions them.

Pinky Madam, New York-raised is slightly sympathetic woman but a strong-willed woman who has always been rational, demanding, impulsive, and deeply discontented with life in India.

"Pinky Madam was short and dark, like most people from the Northeast, but made up for it by being dressed in clothes just like the ones that actresses wear on American TV" (Adiga, 2008, p.39).

She mocks at low class Indian people mannerism, uses foul language, and she belittles Balram and remarks that- You're so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, and look at your clothes! There's red pan all over your teeth, and there are red spots on your shirt. It's disgusting! Get out—clean up the mess you've made in the kitchen and get out" (Adiga, 2008, p.123).

Her moral compass is exhibited when she feels upset about Balram being framed to take up the blame of accident on him. But her fallible character, makes her to break strained and rocky relationship with Ashok and go back to America instead of accepting the blame.

"I think it stinks that you have a servant follow you around everywhere, Ashok. It's like you can't do anything on your own" (Adiga, 2008, p. 62).

Pinky Madam raised in America and married into Indian affluence; she highlights cultural dissonance and emotional irresponsibility. She personifies the paradoxes and annoyances of the affluent, metropolitan class. Her lifestyle in the city and her privileged background makes her impatient with the realities of Indian society and her husband's indecisiveness. Although she holds progressive beliefs, Pinky Madam struggles to fully understand the pervasive social inequalities and complexities that exist around her, which can lead to moments of severity or misunderstanding. Her choice to return to America following a traumatic incident may be interpreted as an escape rather than a confrontation with the systemic issues that envelop her.

There are many characters in the novel who are portrayed in negative shades but the most stained character from where the

seeds of flaw sprout is Kusum, the grandmother of the protagonist. "She had a gold tooth... and a stick in her hand that she had whacked me with" (Adiga, 2008, p.13). She is the most dictatorial, intimidating and cunning, person in the family. Her grin is cunning. Balram says that she "had grinned her way into control of the house; every son and daughter-in-law lived in fear of her" (Adiga, 2008, p.13).

She takes care of the financial debt, she sees that even the offspring of the family are crushed to toil and contribute to clear the family debts. She exerts her influence on Balram by sending him threatening letters, to send money home. We understand that this character is not only subjected to oppression and poverty but makes a point that other members to become the victims of this system. Kusum, Balram's grandmother, a maternal figure perpetuates the logic of survival over empathy.

"Kusum had arranged a marriage for me... I didn't want it, but she said, 'You'll disgrace us if you refuse' (Adiga, 2008, p. 29). She symbolizes the oppressive traditions that maintain social inequality of internalized class and gender oppression. She is not cruel by nature but molded by systemic scarcity. Her moral compromises reflect how victims of oppression can also become enforcers of it, thus complicating traditional victim-perpetrator binaries.

Conclusion

The White Tiger, displays a cluster of vicious characters who intensify the storyline. These characters may make the reader resist them consciously but subconsciously, the readers may relate themselves to their own limitations, scuffles and moral choices they have made in their lifetime. This affiliation breeds a deeper connection with the story. This connection nurtures compassion, drawing readers into the narrative on a personal level. The flaws of the characters may serve as metaphors for social issues, cultural drawbacks, situational experiences, bad luck, or negative elements, which complement the story. In "The White Tiger", though the readers perceive these provocative characters from Balram's point of view, nevertheless, it is a social commentary by the flawed characters who supplement the storyline by contributing to its intricate plot, creating strained relationships, lashing character growth, and offering disruptions for unexpected plot twists. Thus, their imperfections are gripping and indispensable to the narrative's validity.

Aravind Adiga intentionally focused 'The White Tiger' on imperfect characters as a narrative technique to reveal the unsettling realities of modern Indian society. Adiga incorporates morally questionable characters, including Balram Halwai, to illuminate the nation's deepest social stigmas—poverty, caste oppression, corruption, and the illusion of democratic equality. In a rigged game, Balram rewrites the rules, which is a trait often associated with revolutionaries or anti-establishment heroes. Through the choice of flawed characters, Adiga deliberately refrains from romanticizing the economic progress of India. He instead showcases how the same system that creates billionaires also crushes millions. Characters like Ashok and the Stork are not traditional villains; nonetheless, their indifference, hypocrisy, and moral paralysis embody the complacency of the elite, who sustain and benefit from deeply entrenched injustices. In a similar manner, Ashok, although he appears to be benevolent, is constrained by his passive complicity and his reluctance to

confront the corrupt environment that he benefits from. Conversely, the Stork and the Mongoose are exaggerated figures of entitlement and exploitation, embodying the established power structures that uphold inequality. Through these flawed characters, Adiga delivers a biting critique of a society where survival often demands moral compromise, and where the boundary between right and wrong is shaped by one's status in the hierarchy. Thus, the character flaws in 'The White Tiger' function as both personal and societal indictments of a fractured nation.

Ultimately, Adiga's imperfect characters fulfill two roles: they enhance the narrative's realism and relatability, while simultaneously compelling readers to face difficult societal realities. The moral unease they elicit is deliberate—encouraging us to scrutinize not just the actions of the characters, but also the societal framework that fosters such behaviors. Adiga redefines the notion of heroism through this character: it is not characterized by noble sacrifice, but instead by the harsh realities of survival, intelligence, and bravery in the face of overwhelming adversity. Pankaj Mishra, The New York Times Book Reviewer remarked that "Adiga's debut novel is a brilliant and blistering indictment of India's class struggle in a globalized world. He turns the rags-to-riches trope on its head and makes it thrilling." Adiga challenges us to move beyond the notion of individual guilt and to scrutinize the societal frameworks that lead to such horrors. In doing so, he redefines literary realism for contemporary India and asserts the capacity of imperfection to unveil deeper truths. The novel invites readers to assess their own moral beliefs, empathize without idealization, and participate actively in the text's open-ended ethical framework. By calling for interpretive engagement, 'The White Tiger' leaves a meaningful moral impression that lasts beyond the final page. This discomfort is not a narrative flaw—it is the novel's purpose. In doing so, he crafts a literature of resistance—one that begins not on the page, but in the reader's mind.

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