

Cultural Hegemony in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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This paper explores the role of cultural hegemony in perpetuating caste- and class-based oppression in contemporary India through a critical reading of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Grounded in Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, it examines how ideological consent, coercion, and institutional complicity normalize systemic domination. The novel portrays how caste and class hierarchies persist not just through overt force, but through cultural mechanisms that internalize obedience among the oppressed. Balram Halwai's morally ambiguous rise from rural servitude to urban entrepreneurship reflects a critique of the entrenched structures of power that manipulate ideology, economy, and identity. Through qualitative textual analysis, the paper reveals how moments of rebellion, while disruptive, and are often reabsorbed into hegemonic systems. Ultimately, the study emphasizes literature's capacity to critique and challenge dominant ideologies, situating *The White Tiger* within broader debates on power, resistance, and subaltern agency in Indian fiction and cultural discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Hegemony, as theorized by Antonio Gramsci, refers to the dominance of one group over another, maintained through ideological and cultural means rather than overt force. This paper applies the concept of hegemony to understand how caste operates as a pervasive and normalized structure of oppression in Indian society. Gramsci's notion of hegemony highlights how social norms and institutions, including the caste system, are constructed and maintained by dominant groups. In the context of caste, the idea of "normal" social order, with upper castes at the top and lower castes at the bottom, is historically constructed and normalized through various forms of cultural and ideological leadership. Antonio Gramsci, claimed in *'Selections from the Prison Notebooks'* *Hegemony is the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant social group. The 'normal' way in which a society is organized is not a natural way. It is a historical way, produced by the hegemony of a social group.*

Gramsci's theory of hegemony provides a vital framework for understanding the persistence of caste-based oppression in Indian society. Gramsci argues that the power of the ruling class is not sustained merely through force or coercion, but also through ideological control that shapes societal norms and values. This paper applies Gramsci's concept of hegemony to analyze how *The White Tiger* critiques the normalized forms of exploitation that keep the lower castes in positions of subordination. Gramsci's notion of "common sense" — the set of ideas and beliefs that are accepted as natural and inevitable — is crucial to understanding how caste is perpetuated as a "natural" social order. This study examines how *The White Tiger* critiques this "common sense" and exposes the ideological control exerted by the upper castes to maintain their dominance.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* provides a searing critique of India's socio-economic landscape, exposing the entrenched caste-based hierarchies that perpetuate systemic inequalities. The novel traces the journey of Balram Halwai, a low-caste servant from rural India, who rises to wealth and power through morally

ambiguous means. This ascent, while seemingly a story of individual agency and triumph, is ultimately a reflection of the broader social, political, and economic systems that sustain the exploitation of lower castes. Balram's story embodies the clash between the individual's aspirations and the pervasive, unyielding structures of cultural hegemony. Through his eyes, Adiga critiques the mechanisms that normalize caste oppression and economic exploitation, offering a powerful narrative that interrogates the social and moral costs of upward mobility in an unequal society. His transformation into a successful entrepreneur is not merely an escape from servitude but an act of resistance against a society that has already determined his fate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of cultural hegemony has been explored in various theoretical contexts, particularly in relation to caste and social hierarchies in India. M. N. Srinivas, a socialist, penned the idea of the "dominant caste" in his work *Caste in Modern India* and underscores how certain castes maintain their power and influence over others. These dominant castes use their socio-economic position to perpetuate hegemony, both through direct exploitation and by shaping societal norms and practices that legitimize their control over resources, authority, and labor. Srinivas's work on the "dominant caste" provides a foundational understanding of how power is not only a matter of economic or political control but is also reinforced through cultural and ideological mechanisms (Srinivas, 1955, p. 18). According to Srinivas, the dominant caste in rural India maintains its power not just through land ownership or political control, but also through the shaping of social norms and cultural practices that legitimize its authority.

The dominant caste is that caste which has power in the village is influential and whose members are in a position to exploit the labor of the lower castes. (Srinivas, *The Dominant Caste*, 1955, p. 18)

E.P. Thompson's theory of "ruling ideas" expands this understanding by suggesting that the dominant ideology of a society is a reflection of the material interests of the ruling class. Thompson argues that "ruling ideas" are deeply

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embedded within institutions such as religion, education, and media, which play a key role in maintaining the social order by making the exploitation of lower classes, appear as natural and inevitable. In *"The Making of the English Working Class"*, Thompson writes

The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expressions of the dominant material relationships. (Thompson, 1963, p. 9) This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how caste-based hierarchies in India are not only political and economic but also deeply ideological.

Louis Althusser's theory of ideology can be applied to caste, where the dominant caste groups control the ideological apparatuses of society (such as education, religion, law, and media) to propagate a worldview that supports their power. Althusser, in his essay *"Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" Lenin and Philosophy*, expanded the Marxist thought,

The ruling ideology is the ideology of the ruling class. (Althusser, 1971, p.135)

These ideological institutions make caste hierarchies appear natural, thus reinforcing hegemonic control. Adiga also critiques the ideological state apparatus, such as education and religion, which perpetuate caste-based oppression.

Michel Foucault's insights into power and knowledge further deepen this analysis, especially with his argument that social institutions—ranging from schools to prisons—serve as mechanisms of social control. Foucault's theory of "disciplinary power" suggests that power is not always coercive but operates through the subtle shaping of individuals' actions, beliefs, and identities.

Knowledge is not for understanding; it is for transforming the world. (Foucault, 1980, p. 119)

In the context of caste, Foucault's ideas help illuminate how educational and religious institutions in India perpetuate the subordination of lower castes by reinforcing ideologies that legitimize their marginalization.

Recent theorists such as Nancy Fraser and Stuart Hall's Cultural Studies offer contemporary perspectives on cultural hegemony. Fraser in *Scales of Justice* critiques how cultural recognition, in the neoliberal context, is often used to mask underlying economic injustices. Her theory suggests that identity-based politics can sometimes be co-opted by the capitalist system, which continues to exploit the marginalized under the guise of recognizing their cultural differences (Fraser, 2009, p. 54). Hall's concept of articulation further helps to explain how caste and class identities are not fixed but are instead constructed through specific historical and cultural contexts that align with the dominant class's needs (Hall, 1983, p. 28).

These theories provide a nuanced lens through which to examine *The White Tiger*, as Adiga's work illustrates how caste identities are both culturally constructed and economically exploited to maintain dominant power structures. Critics such as Harleen Ruprah have noted that Balram's rise is not merely an act of individual ambition but a critique of the very system that allows such exploitation (Ruprah, 2018). Similarly, Susan Bayly, in *Caste, Society and Politics in India* emphasizes the intersection of economic and cultural hegemony, arguing that caste oppression is both a material and ideological construct (Bayly, 1999).

METHOD

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to explore how Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* critiques the cultural hegemony that sustains caste-based oppression. The analysis is structured around Gramsci's theory of hegemony, focusing on the mechanisms of consent, coercion, and ideological domination that operate within the novel. Additionally, the study draws upon the insights of contemporary cultural theorists, including Nancy Fraser's critique of neoliberal recognition and Stuart Hall's theory of articulation, to deepen the analysis of caste as both an ideological and economic system. The research involves a close reading of key passages from *The White Tiger*, focusing on moments that highlight the internalization of caste-based subjugation and the moments of resistance that challenge these hegemonic structures. The novel's depiction of Balram's moral

ambiguity and eventual rebellion serves as the primary case study for understanding how cultural hegemony is resisted and transformed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Characteristics of Hegemony in *The White Tiger*

Adiga's *The White Tiger* vividly illustrates the characteristics of hegemony through its depiction of systemic exploitation and ideological control. The following sections analyze these characteristics in detail:

Consent and Cultural Conditioning

Gramsci's concept of consent is central to understanding the "Rooster Coop" metaphor in the novel. Balram describes the "Rooster Coop" as a system where individuals internalize their subjugation, perceiving it as their natural fate. This acceptance is reinforced by social norms and cultural narratives that portray servitude as honorable and rebellion as dangerous. He observes, "The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (TWT, 2008 p. 175), highlighting how cultural narratives sustain economic exploitation. Nancy Fraser's critique of cultural recognition applies here, as caste identity is leveraged to justify systemic inequality (Fraser, 2009, p. 71). Balram's internal struggle oscillating between loyalty to his employer and resentment of his exploitation epitomizes the power of consent in maintaining hegemonic control.

Coercion and Economic Control

While consent plays a significant role, coercion remains a critical mechanism of hegemony in *The White Tiger*. The novel depicts systemic violence, corruption, and economic disparities that reinforce caste hierarchies. Landowners and politicians collude to ensure the subjugation of the poor, using intimidation and violence to suppress dissent. Balram's observations about the complicity between the police and the wealthy highlight the entrenchment of coercive power: "The police and the politicians are in each other's pockets. One hand washes the other" (TWT, 2008, p. 99). Stuart Hall's theory of articulation demonstrates how these alliances between institutions create and perpetuate dominant ideologies (*Cultural*

Studies 1983, p. 30). Balram's recognition of these coercive dynamics propels him to commit an act of rebellion that, while morally ambiguous, serves as a critique of systemic corruption.

The economic system in *The White Tiger* perpetuates a rigid class hierarchy, where the wealthy control the resources, and the poor are trapped in cycles of poverty with little chance of upward mobility. "I had to work for them for nothing, for free, just to learn how to survive in the world of the rich" (TWT, 2008, p. 143) This illustrates the exploitative relationship between the rich and the poor. Balram's sarcastic remark, "In the old days, there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies" (TWT, 2008, p. 64), highlights the intersection of caste and economic disparity, further cementing the role of cultural hegemony in shaping systemic exploitation. Marxist theorists like Louis Althusser also discuss how the capitalist state apparatus functions to reproduce economic relations that favor the elites.

Balram, though technically employed, is exploited as part of the system that ensures wealth continues to accumulate in the hands of the elite. "You have to be loyal to the people who give you your food and your livelihood. Even if they're rotten, you have to do it for your family" (TWT, 2008, p. 158) Balram internalizes the logic of subservience, which shows how economic control works in a way that keeps people like him loyal to a system that oppresses them. Gramsci, again, provides a framework for understanding economic control. He argues that the ruling class maintains its power by controlling the means of production and using the economic system to reproduce inequality. This economic dominance, Gramsci claims, is also supported by the ideology that economic and social hierarchies are "natural" and unchangeable.

Ideological Domination

Gramsci's theory of ideological domination is reflected in the novel's critique of education and religion as tools of control. Schools for the poor, depicted as underfunded and corrupt, fail to empower lower-caste children, effectively

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maintaining the status quo. Adiga exposed the corruption in education system as the school teacher of Balram Mr. Krishna steals government's money allocated for school lunches and uniforms and justifies his act by saying that he himself had not been paid for six months. *"The schoolteacher was stealing our lunch money. He hadn't given us uniforms, or books, or anything but beatings."* (TWT, 2008, p. 35) This highlights how teachers, rather than supporting and educating students, misuse the system for their own financial benefit, depriving children of their fundamental right to education. The disparity between rural and urban education becomes evident, as the quote emphasizes the significant differences in opportunities available to the privileged compared to the underprivileged, highlighting the systemic disregard for rural and economically disadvantaged communities. *"The rich children went to schools run by nuns and wore crisp white uniforms, while we sat under a tree and taught ourselves from books."* (TWT, 2008, p. 35)

Foucault's analysis of power and discipline further elucidates how social institutions shape individual behavior and beliefs (*Discipline and Punish*, p. 184). Religion, in particular, is portrayed as reinforcing caste-based oppression by emphasizing submission and acceptance of one's social position. Ideological control is pervasive in *The White Tiger* as the ruling classes justify their control through ideologies that promote passivity, fatalism, and submission, especially in relation to caste and class. "You see, I know what I am. And I know what I can be. I am not a slave anymore" (TWT, 2008, p.240). This marks a moment of ideological shift for Balram, as he rejects the worldview that subjugated him and embraces the possibility of upward mobility through any means necessary.

"The poor are like dogs. You can feed them and keep them in a cage, but they will never be like you" (TWT, 2008, p. 158). This reflects the ingrained ideology of superiority that the rich hold over the poor, perpetuating the belief that class difference is both justified and permanent. Gramsci's concept of "hegemony" directly addresses the role of ideology in perpetuating social inequality. He argued that the ruling class doesn't merely control the economic and political spheres; it also shapes the way people think through schools, media, religion, and other

institutions. The wealthy elite of India in *The White Tiger* maintain control by ingrainning these ideologies into the consciousness of the poor, making them accept their social position as natural and inevitable.

Cultural Narratives and Resistance

Balram's journey from servitude to rebellion symbolizes a break from hegemonic control. His act of violence against his employer signifies the rejection of "common sense" narratives that justify subjugation. Harleen Ruprah argues that Balram's morally ambiguous rebellion reflects the desperation of individuals trapped within hegemonic structures, aligning with Gramsci's view that counter-hegemonic resistance often emerges from lived experiences of oppression (*IJAR*, p. 4). Balram's transformation challenges the cultural narratives that legitimize exploitation. His ultimate success is tinged with moral compromise, illustrating the complexities of resistance within an oppressive system. "I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break free of it, It requires masters like Mr.Ashok, who, despite his many virtues, was not much of a master, to be weeded out, and excellent subordinates like myself to take his place"(TWT, 2008, p. 320).The novel suggests that breaking free from hegemonic control requires both strategic rebellion and a willingness to challenge deeply ingrained ideologies, subordination and class hierarchies, reinforce the existing power structures. The rich people (Capitalists) enjoy comforts in life and leave the poor people (proletariats) in miserable condition. It is at the cost of the labor class, the Capitalists have luxurious life. That is why, Balram says, "*A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different. My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from; ...*" (TWT, 2008, p. 27).

The cultural divisions between the rich and the poor are internalized. The poor are perceived as inherently "other," and their position in society is legitimized by cultural norms. As stated

"In the darkness of night, I could hear the rich people talking about 'us'—the poor, and 'them'—the rich. We had no place to stand in their world" (TWT, 2008, p.45).

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Balram articulates the deep cultural conditioning that binds the poor to their fate, a product of centuries of ideological control that positions them as lesser beings. "The Rooster Coop, that's where we are,. We've been told we're not good enough to be anything else, not good enough to change. We're slaves, in the hearts of our own hearts" (TWT, 2008, p. 213) Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony is key here. Gramsci argued that the ruling class maintains dominance not only through political and economic power but through the control of culture. Cultural norms—such as those surrounding caste and class—are used to normalize inequality. The poor come to believe that their subjugation is part of the natural order. The ideas of thinkers like Raymond Williams, who explored how culture is tied to power, and Pierre Bourdieu, who discussed the role of cultural capital in perpetuating social inequality, are also relevant here.

Political Dominance

In *The White Tiger*, political hegemony is established through the collusion between politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen who maintain control over the system of governance. Adiga compares the benefits of gaining power in India to eternal joy.

"For political leaders, an election is an enormous business. The Great Socialist admits to embezzling one billion rupees from the Darkness and depositing it in a bank account in a little, lovely country in Europe populated by white people with black money." (TWT, 2008, p. 98)

The political system is not seen as serving the people, but as a mechanism for the elite to protect their wealth and power. "The Great Socialist doesn't want to change things. He wants to keep things just the way they are. He wants to keep the poor people in their place" (TWT, 2008, p. 87) This quote illustrates how political figures in India maintain a facade of reform while ultimately preserving the status quo. The "Great Socialist" appears to offer solutions for the poor but actually works to sustain a system where the rich stay rich and the poor stay oppressed.

"The police and the politicians are in each other's pockets. One hand washes the other, they say" (TWT, 2008, p. 99). Here, Balram reflects on the deep corruption that runs through the state apparatus. The police, far from being a force for justice, act as protectors of the political and economic elites. Antonio Gramsci's theory of political hegemony explains this situation. Gramsci argued that political dominance is not just a matter of coercive force but also of securing "consent" from the ruled. This consent is achieved through the state's ideological control, which makes the system appear legitimate and beneficial to all, even when it is skewed to favor the elite. The politicians and government officials took bribe and involve in fraud as Mr. Ashok bribing the government officials for the benefit of family's business. Bribery can be used as golden gloves to lure over law enforcement officials.

"It's amazing. The moment you show cash, everyone knows your language. (TWT, 2008, p. 177)" Gramsci's ideas in his *Prison Notebooks* emphasize that ruling classes maintain power by integrating their own interests into the broader social and political discourse, thus ensuring stability.

Coercive and Consensus-based Power

Both coercion and consensus are used to maintain hegemonic control in *The White Tiger*. Coercion is evident in the violence and intimidation that Balram faces, but consensus is built through cultural and ideological submission.

"A master is a master. And you are nothing. That is the way the world works" (Adiga, 2008, p. 112). This quote highlights the coercive aspect of hegemony—those in power use physical and psychological force to remind subordinates of their place.

"I killed the man who gave me food, but I did it for my family" (TWT, 2008, p. 235). Balram justifies his crime as a necessary break from the system, a moment of rebellion against both coercion and ideological control. Balram takes control of the situation. *"All I needed was the ability to be a man, and for that-one murder was enough," he explains his condition* (TWT, 2008, p. 318). He is a victim of

circumstance, marginalization, and labeling theory, not a hardened criminal. Gramsci argued that hegemony is maintained not just by coercion (force) but also by the creation of a "consensus" among the ruled, who internalize the beliefs and values that justify their subordination. The ruling class does not simply force the lower classes into submission; it also persuades them, through education and cultural institutions, that their position in society is natural. Michel Foucault also explored how power is internalized through social institutions, making it appear as though those in power are legitimate.

Global or Regional Reach

While the novel focuses on domestic issues within India, the forces that shape the characters' lives are also influenced by global economic systems, particularly the spread of capitalist ideals.

"The foreigner...comes here and buys our land, sells it, makes millions, and leaves. What do they know about us?" (TWT, 2008, p.189). This quote speaks to the increasing dominance of global economic systems over local cultures and economies, suggesting the international reach of economic hegemony. The global reach of economic hegemony is an important aspect of Marxist and post-colonial analyses. In particular, theorists like Immanuel Wallerstein's "world-systems theory" argue that global capitalism shapes the local conditions of countries like India, keeping them in a subordinate position in the global economic hierarchy. This aligns with Adiga's portrayal of the economic dominance of multinational corporations and foreign capital in India.

Sustainability through Institutions

The institutions in *The White Tiger* such as the police, the judiciary, and the education system function to perpetuate social inequality and maintain the dominance of the elites. These institutions, which should ideally serve the public good, are instead manipulated to reinforce the hegemonic power of the wealthy and powerful. "The police, the courts, the media—they all serve the rich" (TWT, 2008, p. 125). This highlights how state institutions are complicit in maintaining the

power of the wealthy. Instead of acting as impartial arbiters of justice, these institutions are co-opted to serve the interests of the elites, reinforcing the broader social system of inequality. Justice is merely superficial. In hit and run case, stork and the family forced Balram to accept the crime which he never commit. This is against human rights.

“A man on a bicycle getting killed – the police even do not have to register a case. A man on motorbike getting killed – they would have to register that. A man in a car getting killed – they would have thrown me in the jail” (TWT, 2008, p. 309). According to Gramsci, institutions play a key role in sustaining hegemony by shaping individuals’ consciousness and reinforcing dominant ideologies. Gramsci argued that the ruling class utilizes these institutions to "discipline" individuals and maintain social control through both direct and indirect means. This is similar to how Adiga portrays the institutions of India in the novel. Institutions like the police and judiciary, far from being neutral, are part of the state's apparatus of ideological control. Michel Foucault’s theory of "disciplinary power" also complements this idea, where institutions are not merely places of coercion but are integral in the shaping of behavior, attitudes, and perceptions of power.

DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals how *The White Tiger* encapsulates the dynamics of cultural hegemony, illustrating the interplay between consent, coercion, and ideological domination. Adiga’s critique of systemic exploitation highlights the role of cultural narratives in perpetuating caste-based inequalities. By integrating contemporary theories from Nancy Fraser (2009) and Stuart Hall (1983), this study underscores the evolving nature of hegemony in neoliberal contexts. Balram’s rebellion offers a nuanced perspective on resistance. While it challenges the systemic oppression perpetuated by caste and class hierarchies, it also exposes the moral ambiguities of achieving upward mobility in a corrupt system. This duality invites readers to critically examine the societal structures that force individuals into such compromises. Comparative insights can be drawn from global literature. Works such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* and Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*

similarly critique the systemic exploitation of marginalized groups within their respective contexts. These comparisons underscore the universality of Adiga's critique, positioning *The White Tiger* as part of a broader literary tradition that interrogates power and inequality.

Parallel Narratives of Hegemony: Comparative Insights from *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Serious Men*

To deepen the exploration of cultural hegemony and its multifaceted manifestations in contemporary Indian narratives, it is worthwhile to briefly consider two parallel texts *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), directed by Danny Boyle, and *Serious Men* (2010), a novel by Manu Joseph. While distinct in form and tone, both works portray protagonists navigating structural oppression through subversive performances of merit and identity. These texts, much like *The White Tiger*, interrogate how marginalized individuals internalize, manipulate, or resist hegemonic ideologies in pursuit of dignity, power, or visibility. Together, they reinforce and broaden the conceptual scope of cultural hegemony beyond caste oppression alone, showing how class mobility, state power, education, and aspiration are co-opted into systems of consent and control.

***Slumdog Millionaire*: The Spectacle of Meritocracy and the Hegemony of Hope**

Slumdog Millionaire, adapted from Vikas Swarup's novel *Q&A* (2005), dramatizes the meteoric rise of Jamal Malik, a boy from the Mumbai slums who wins a national game show. While on the surface, the narrative celebrates resilience and love, it also masks the deeper ideological structures that sustain inequality. The game show, a symbolic vehicle of neoliberal hope, transforms Jamal into a national spectacle, perpetuating the fantasy that success is equally accessible, irrespective of birth or background. In this spectacle, the machinery of capitalism and media constructs a hegemonic belief that individual merit can transcend systemic injustice—a core tenet of neoliberal ideology.

The film's framing device Jamal answering game show questions through traumatic memories creates a narrative that, while emotionally compelling, subtly

reinforces the myth of social mobility through passive endurance rather than systemic resistance. As Deepika Bahri notes, *Slumdog Millionaire* “repackages poverty as exotic spectacle, providing redemption without a call for structural change”(Bahri, 2010, p. 87). This aligns with Antonio Gramsci’s theory that hegemony functions by presenting the dominant class’s values as universal, natural, and aspirational (Gramsci, 1971). The audience is encouraged to believe that the system works because one exceptional boy won.

Unlike Balram Halwai, who actively breaks the rules of the system to escape oppression, Jamal complies with it, and in doing so, reinforces the legitimacy of hegemonic structures. The show's host, Prem Kumar, though also of humble origin, mirrors the complicity of those who ascend within a hegemonic system and then serve as gatekeepers to its rewards. In contrast to Balram’s violent rejection of his master’s world, Jamal’s story concludes with romantic fulfillment and public celebration, a neoliberal fantasy that glosses over the structural roots of poverty and exclusion.

Serious Men: Mimicry, Caste, and the Fabrication of Success

Manu Joseph’s *Serious Men* provides a more sardonic, but no less searing, critique of caste-based cultural hegemony. Ayyan Mani, a Dalit clerk in a prestigious scientific institute, orchestrates a hoax to make his son appear as a genius, thus inserting his family into elite spaces from which they have been historically excluded. Mani’s scheme represents a sophisticated form of subversive mimicry, where he appropriates the markers of Brahminical intelligence, scientific acumen, language, demeanor—not to dismantle the system, but to temporarily outwit it.

Ayyan’s actions are not simply deceit; they are deeply political. He is painfully aware that in a caste-driven meritocracy, genuine talent is often not enough. His son's fabricated brilliance becomes a means of performing what Homi Bhabha calls “colonial mimicry” a partial presence that is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 86). In Ayyan’s world, access to respect and opportunity is determined not just by skill or effort but by alignment with upper-caste cultural

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capital. Thus, his manipulation of the truth is both an indictment of the myth of meritocracy and a desperate bid to outmaneuver an entrenched system.

Serious Men critiques how institutions such as science and education, traditionally associated with objectivity and fairness, are also steeped in hegemonic assumptions. As Mary E. John observes, “Merit becomes the new language through which old hierarchies of caste are reinscribed” (John, 2011, p. 41). Ayyan’s struggle is not just against poverty but against epistemological exclusion the way knowledge itself is coded to benefit the dominant class. His mimicry is thus a strategic, albeit morally ambiguous, act of resistance, similar in spirit to Balram’s subversion of his master’s trust in *The White Tiger*. Both characters exhibit agency, but their resistance is channeled through the very structures they seek to undermine.

Intersecting Paths of Resistance

While *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Serious Men* differ in tone and strategy, they collectively reinforce Adiga’s central theme in *The White Tiger*: that in a society structured by hegemonic norms, the oppressed must often resort to morally complex acts to navigate or challenge their circumstances. Balram’s rebellion, Ayyan’s mimicry, and Jamal’s endurance each reflect distinct responses to a shared condition structural exclusion masked as individual failure.

These narratives demonstrate how cultural hegemony persists not just through overt coercion or ideology, but through the construction of false hopes, competitive scarcity, and selective visibility. Each text, in its own way, underscores Gramsci’s insight that the most potent forms of domination are those that appear consensual, embedded in everyday life and internalized by the oppressed themselves. The illusion of freedom whether through entrepreneurship, education, or televised spectacle becomes the new face of control.

Moreover, the insertion of these case studies brings the discussion of hegemony into multiplex terrain across caste, class, education, and media and provides a more composite understanding of resistance, not as heroic defiance, but as a continuum of negotiation, performance, and survival.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga paints a compelling portrait of the socio-economic, political, and cultural systems that uphold the dominance of the rich and powerful in modern India. Through the lens of Balram Halwai's transformation from an impoverished rural village to a successful entrepreneur, the novel critiques the multiple layers of hegemony that shape and sustain the status quo. These include political dominance, economic exploitation, cultural subjugation, ideological control, and the coercive mechanisms used to maintain the power structures. The interplay of these elements highlights the complex ways in which hegemony operates, not only through force but also by creating consent among the oppressed, making their subjugation seem natural and inevitable. Adiga's portrayal of political corruption, as exemplified by the "Great Socialist" and the complicity of the police and judiciary, aligns with Antonio Gramsci's theory of political hegemony, where the ruling class secures its dominance by controlling not only the state apparatus but also the ideological and cultural institutions. The economic system in *The White Tiger*, which perpetuates a rigid class hierarchy, echoes Gramsci's argument that economic relations are shaped by the ruling class to maintain their own power. Furthermore, the novel critiques the cultural norms and ideological beliefs that keep the poor in a state of submission, drawing on Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, where the ruling class uses culture to reinforce their social position and make inequality seem natural.

Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* provides a compelling critique of cultural hegemony, revealing how systemic oppression is maintained through consent, coercion, and ideological domination. By deconstructing the mechanisms of caste-based exploitation, the novel invites readers to confront the pervasive influence of hegemony in shaping India's socio-economic landscape. Balram's ultimate rejection of these ideologies, culminating in his violent break from the "Rooster Coop," symbolizes a form of resistance against the hegemonic system. However, his rebellion remains an isolated act rather than a catalyst for widespread societal transformation. This tension reflects the broader, ongoing struggle for power and

freedom within a deeply unequal system. Adiga's narrative, therefore, not only critiques the political and economic foundations of oppression but also the cultural and ideological forces that hinder genuine social change.

By examining *The White Tiger* through the lens of Gramsci's theory of hegemony, we gain a deeper understanding of how systemic oppression functions on multiple levels. The novel urges readers to reflect on the pervasive mechanisms of consent, coercion, and ideological domination that sustain global and regional inequalities. Moreover, it invites a critical examination of the potential for resistance, even in the face of overwhelming power. This study emphasizes the transformative potential of literature as a site of resistance, amplifying subaltern voices and challenging entrenched hierarchies. Gramsci's theory of hegemony, alongside insights from contemporary theorists like Fraser and Hall, highlights the need for counter-hegemonic efforts to foster a more equitable society. Ultimately, Adiga's work underscores the transformative power of literature in amplifying subaltern voices and challenging entrenched social hierarchies. Through its exploration of hegemony, *The White Tiger* calls for counter-hegemonic efforts to dismantle the systems of oppression and create a more equitable society. By drawing on Gramsci's insights, alongside contributions from contemporary theorists like Nancy Fraser and Stuart Hall, the novel positions itself as a call to action, highlighting the necessity of resistance to challenge deeply embedded systems of domination.

SUGGESTIONS

Future research could explore the representation of counter-hegemonic movements in contemporary Indian literature and cinema. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies integrating sociology, political science, and cultural studies could further illuminate the mechanisms of caste oppression and resistance. Such research could examine how neo liberalism and globalization reshape traditional power dynamics, offering new challenges and opportunities for resistance. Adiga's work ultimately serves as a call to action. By exposing the entrenched systems of exploitation, *The White Tiger* encourages readers to question the cultural and

institutional norms that sustain inequality. The novel highlights the transformative potential of literature to inspire awareness and drive societal change.

EPILOGUE: HEGEMONY AND THE INDIAN CULTURAL IMAGINATION

The implications of cultural hegemony, as explored through *The White Tiger*, resonate far beyond the literary landscape. In contemporary India, hegemonic control continues to shape how individuals perceive themselves and others particularly through institutions such as education, media, and digital culture. These spaces have become potent carriers of dominant ideologies, often reinforcing caste hierarchies, class divisions, and neoliberal myths of success under the guise of merit, nationalism, or tradition.

Education, in particular, remains a powerful ideological apparatus. While positioned as a democratic tool of empowerment, the Indian education system frequently mirrors structural inequalities. Access to quality education is still closely linked to caste, class, and regional disparities. The curriculum, language of instruction, and institutional practices often privilege dominant cultural narratives while marginalizing the voices and histories of subaltern communities. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, schools play a critical role in reproducing social hierarchies by legitimizing the cultural capital of the ruling class (Bourdieu, 1984). In India, this means that the promise of education as a leveler remains largely aspirational for many, echoing the world Balram navigates.

Popular culture and media also participate in shaping hegemonic consent. Mainstream cinema, television, and social media often portray aspirational stories that celebrate upward mobility, yet rarely interrogate the systemic conditions that constrain real change. The glorification of the “self-made” individual, much like Balram’s entrepreneurial success, feeds into a neoliberal fantasy that obscures structural injustice. This cultural script fosters a consent-based acceptance of inequality, where the oppressed are conditioned to believe in personal failure rather than systemic exclusion.

Recognizing these patterns is essential not only for academic inquiry but also for collective cultural awareness. Literature such as *The White Tiger*, along with films and novels discussed in this study, serves a vital function: it disrupts the comfort of dominant narratives and compels readers to question what is presented as natural, fair, or inevitable. As cultural texts continue to challenge the status quo, they offer avenues for critical thinking, resistance, and ultimately, transformation within the Indian cultural imagination.

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