

Original Paper

An Analysis of Balram in *The White Tiger* from the Perspective of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Yu Deng¹

¹ School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Received: November 22, 2025 Accepted: December 6, 2025 Online Published: December 25, 2025

doi:10.22158/elsr.v6n4p93

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/elsr.v6n4p93>

Abstract

The White Tiger is a major work by Indian writer Aravind Adiga. This novel mainly tells the story of the son of a poor rickshaw who becomes a famous entrepreneur in India later. Balram goes through many hardships growing up, first dropping out of school to become a tea shop buddy, and then becoming a driver for an upper-class family, where he is belittled and insulted. But Balram doesn't succumb to his desperation, he rises up and gradually learns to be cold and rational. Eventually, Balram kills Mr. Ashok, fighting his way through the blood. Balram's growth is driven by different levels of needs. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, physiological needs, safety needs, needs for belonging and love, respect needs, and self-actualization needs are the driving forces for people's behavior. This paper will use Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory to analyze the needs of Balram, and try to explain the reasons behind his transformation.

Keywords

The White Tiger; Maslow's hierarchy of needs, India

1. Introduction to *The White Tiger*

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a novel full of satire and black humor. The novel unfolds through the eyes of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, revealing the deep class conflicts, corruption and moral dilemmas of Indian society.

In the passage, the protagonist Balram becomes a successful entrepreneur from a rickshaw driver's son. However, his tracks of development ironically show how to rise to power in India through betrayal and violence, but in fact exposes the bloodshed and injustice behind India's economic rise.

2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory is proposed by American psychologist Abraham Maslow in 1943. This theory, dividing human needs into five levels from low to high, forming a pyramid structure, having a far-reaching impact on the fields of psychology, behavioral science, and management.

Physiological needs are at the bottom of the hierarchy and relate to basic survival needs such as breathing, water, food, sleep, etc. If they are not met, survival will be jeopardized. Safety needs follow closely behind, and include physical safety, health security, and economic security, ensuring that individuals are protected both physically and mentally. Social needs, the need for love and belonging, involve friendship, love, and sexual intimacy, and people aspire to build deep interpersonal relationships and be part of a group. Respect needs are categorized into self-esteem, which is about confidence, competence, and achievement, and other-esteem, which is about status, prestige, and being respected. The desire for power is also part of the respect needs and is expressed as the desire to control or be controlled.

The need for self-actualization is located at the top of the pyramid and is the realm in which one realizes one's ideals and ambitions and exerts one's maximum capacity. Those who reach this level accept themselves and others, have increased problem-solving skills and are good at handling things independently.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory provides a framework for understanding human behavior and motivation, emphasizing that lower-level needs must be met before higher-level needs can be pursued. It has been widely used in the fields of education, business management, and counseling to help people better understand human behavior and psychological needs. And today, the theory is popular even in literature.

3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Balram

3.1 *Physiological and Safety Needs*

Balram was born in the dark land of India, Laxmangarh village, and grew up surrounded by poverty and hunger. In the land of darkness, Electricity poles are defuncted, water tap is broken, and children's heads are oversized from lack of nourishment. In addition to the lack of food and clothing, the educational, economic and social functioning is equally dysfunctional. For example, there is no food in the schools, no chairs in the classrooms, and the teachers are looking for ways to embezzle. More poignant is the death of Balram's father. His father is a struggling rickshaw driver with a spine like a piece of twine. He contracts tuberculosis. But the corrupt hospitals are unable to save him, leading to his eventual death. This also illustrates the plight of the underclass in India who lack medical care. Thus, at the bottom of the Indian hierarchy the father's end is the end of millions of poor people, including Balram.

Balram's living condition is also characterized by violence and oppression, especially the threat of landlords and the police, which perpetuates his insecurity. In Laxmangarh village, the poor people are exploited by the insatiable four major landlords, to whom they are not only required to pay their share of money, but also to bow deeply before them and touch the dirt on their feet. In contrast to the commoners,

the four landlords lived in luxury, with their own temples, wells and ponds. At the same time, the seemingly advanced democratic politics of the area is always controlled by the rich. In India, democratic election is never materialized. A low-caste rickshaw-puller from Laxmangarh village, who tries to vote according to his own will and thus break free from his miserable and depressing existence, is beaten to death by the police and the Socialist Party's accomplices. In the eyes of the upper classes and the rich, the lives of the poor are as low as ants. Violence and exploitation are everywhere and taken for granted by the poor. As a member of the poor, Balram is not immune to these threats to his life. Whenever he tries to resist, he will be subjected to violence.

3.2 Social Needs

Social needs are the needs for love and belonging in this novel. Balram hankers for love, but he is suffocated by his family's expectations and oppressive realities. From the time he was born, Balram does not get enough attention from his family. For example, his family didn't even give him a name. When he was asked the name by his teacher at school, he replied that he doesn't have one, explaining that his mother was bedridden, his father was too busy to make a living, and his other relatives didn't have the time to do so. Balram has a brilliant mind. When he is in school, he is the only one who could answer the questions asked by the supervisor, and he is called the White Tiger for that reason. However, as the family owes a lot of money for his cousin's wedding, grandma Kusum makes Balram drop out of school to earn money by working in a tea shop, thus burying his talent and dreams. The root cause of all this may not be entirely the family's lack of concern for Balram, but rather the fact that as poor people, they have no choice but to do what they are forced to do by the pressures of life.

In India, the bonds between family members run deep. However, it on the one hand, enables one to enjoy affection, but on the other hand, one can become too dependent on the emotions of the family. Being bound by guilt, fear and responsibility at the same time. The family's expectations of Balram weigh him down at times. When Balram works for the Ashok's family, grandma Kusum asks him to give every rupee he earns to the family, which leaves Balram with no space to live on his own. When Balram goes to Delhi, the family sends his nephew over to learn driving from him without his consent. Thus, in a way, the family, whilst loving Balram, also leaves no stone unturned in sucking his blood.

Marriage is also an important expectation that the family has of Balram. But it is not exactly the hope that he will live a happy and successful life, but rather the hope that he will get a good dowry from the woman. As mentioned in the text, in India, where the caste system is deeply rooted, the social status of different castes is different, and lower castes who want to improve their social status need to have their daughters intermarry with men from a higher class than their own. As a result, the woman's family often faces a high dowry. That's why Balram had to drop out of school to help out in a tea shop when his cousin got married. In addition to trying to extort money from the woman, the family wants Balram to marry because they want him to follow in the footsteps of the rest of the family. For example, when Balram comes home for his first visit, the neighbors yell, "Let him get married!" "That's the only way to tame a wild boy like him!"

Fed up with all this, Balram kills Mr. Ashok and runs away, with the result that his family is about to be retaliated against by his employer's family. However, Balram's conscience and feelings for his family have not yet been broken. He chooses to turn back to take his nephew, Dharam. After escaping to Bangalore, Balram depends on nephew Dharam for life. However, Balram still mentioned in his letter that he might also kill Dharam one day. At this moment, Balram completely abandons his family. However, it is ultimately a consequence of unmet needs for belonging and love and passive resistance. Fundamentally, he longs for kinship and love.

3.3 Respect Needs

Balram hopes to escape his underclass status and gain respect. By observing the rich, he realizes that money and power are the keys to earning respect. After the end of British colonial rule, India began to modernize as a liberal democracy, but the traditional caste system remained deeply entrenched in Indian society. The system is based on the so-called clean and unclean standards, the Indian people are divided into high and low nobility between the races, between the various castes of the hierarchy. Balram's surname is Halwai, which seems to indicate that he can only make sweets in the future, can never break through his destiny. Later, even when Balram succeeds in becoming Mr. Ashok's driver, he is lack of dignity. At home, he has to soak and massage Stork's feet and bathe the puppy. Worse more, Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam often tease him for his poor English. However, the most humiliating part of the incident is to let Balram take the fall for Pinky Madam. One night, on the way home, the drunken Pinky Madam suddenly offers to take over Balram's driving duties, but unfortunately kills a child and escapes. The next day, Mongoose finds Balram and says, "You are part of the family", and Balram is proud. But then Mongoose hands Balram a piece of paper and asks him to sign that he is the one who kills the man. Masters don't treat their servants as human beings unless they have use for them, such is the hierarchical Indian society. Since the lives of his family are also in the hands of the Mongoose family, Balram has to sign the papers. What's even more surprising is that Balram's family would not be indignant when they learned that Balram has taken the blame for his master, but would be proud of him. This is the Rooster Coop theory that Balram later discovers, in which the roosters in the Rooster Coop see their fellow roosters killed, and know that it will be their turn next, but they do not fight back, nor do they try to escape from the Rooster Coop. In order to break free from the Rooster Coop, Balram intentionally controls his bad habits, imitates his master Mr. Ashok's way of living. But all this does not get him out of his enslaved status, and Balram is saddened to discover that he is still seen as a "country mouse", who not only has to do chores like a handyman, but is also constantly warned and scolded by Mr. Ashok and Mongoose.

Balram finds his identity in the symbol of the white tiger, believing that he is different and destined to break free from his destiny. The white tiger is the Bengal tiger, the national treasure of India. There are two occasions in the text where the relationship between the white tiger and the main character Balram is explicitly mentioned. The first time is when he is in school. Because of his exceptional intelligence, the school supervisor calls him a "white tiger" -- the rarest animal that can be seen only once in a lifetime

in the primitive jungle. This compliment sets the stage for Balram's self-awareness. The second time is at the zoo, where Balram is looking at a white tiger that is walking numbly in a straight line. Suddenly, the tiger stops and looks straight at Balram. Balram feels a wave of ecstasy and faints. The faint may be euphoria that comes from the determination to escape from the dark place. From the initial fear and cowardice to the final determination and fearlessness, Balram uses the imagery of the white tiger to re-recognize his self-identity, and really grows into a real white tiger.

3.4 Self-actualization Needs

Balram's eventual class leap through murdering his employer and stealing his wealth is an act that reflects his intense desire for self-actualization. This act, though extreme, reflects his strong desire for self-realization. Balram's transformation from a poor underclass driver to a capitalist is achieved through his awareness of and extreme resistance to the caste system, class solidification, and social injustice in India. His class crossing is not a success in the traditional sense of struggle, but a dark transformation filled with violence, betrayal, and moral subversion. Therefore, Balram's murder of Mr. Ashok, seems to be a sudden but inevitable choice of his awakened class consciousness. The immediate trigger for Mr. Ashok's murder is the incident of taking the blame for Pinky Madam, which exposes the hypocrisy of the master-servant relationship -- Balram realizes that he is just a scapegoat that can be sacrificed at any time. At the same time, Mr. Ashok's moral hypocrisy and his acquiescence to Pinky Madam's insults accelerates Balram's determination to fight back. The killing of Mr. Ashok is also a symbolic act that transforms him from domesticated chicken to white tiger.

Balram knows that in a caste-ridden, education-monopolized Indian society, the lower classes cannot accumulate capital the right way, so the 700,000 rupees in Mr. Ashok's briefcase is his only ticket to a class crossing. Also, it is the first pot of money and the starting point for the accumulation of raw capital that he has violently plundered. Balram does not feel remorse or guilt for his killings, but sees them as a necessary evil. In India, when the poor want to make money, it is either through crime or politics - both of which are stained with blood. After his murderous escape, Balram's identity is reconstructed. In Bangalore, Balram uses the stolen money to bribe Bangalore officials, registers his cab company, and integrates himself into corrupt business networks by forging documents and inflating the number of vehicles to obtain government contracts. Balram's cab company employs underprivileged drivers, pays them low wages, and extends their hours of work, reproducing the patterns of exploitation he once hated. Balram takes the name Mr. Ashok Sharma, ironically appropriating the identity of the oppressor and suggesting the succession of the new class to the old logic of oppression. At the same time, he learns the hypocrisy of Mr. Ashok's family, as Balram caters to the IT industry by providing clean and efficient pickups and drop-offs for multinationals, while covering up the sweaty labor of his drivers in the same way as his former employers. Even Balram's life is good, the truth is that he lives in a state of identity anxiety, relying on alcohol and lies to maintain his status, suggesting that this reversal cannot fill the moral and spiritual void. It is important to note that Balram does not satisfy his needs step by step, but rather pursues self-actualization through violent means after being deprived of his bottom needs, such as

physiological and safety needs for a long period of time, which constitutes a reversal of Maslow's idealized model. In short, Balram's self-actualization is not a triumph of personal struggle, but a distorted mirror image of India's corrupt society, where his success proves that crime is the only way to rise, and his rise as a rebel replicates the logic of the oppressor, proving that the system of corruption eats away at all idealism.

4. Conclusion

Through Balram's extreme life trajectory, *The White Tiger* reveals how Indian society blocks the needs of the underclass through structural oppression: Balram's story shows how the underclass struggles to meet their basic needs in a society of extreme inequality and ultimately realizes their self-worth through extreme means. His experience reveals the profound impact of social systems on the psyche of individuals and the complexity and cost of personal struggle in an oppressive environment. The powerful use of the physical and security needs of the poor as a means of control, like debt bondage, threats of violence, forcing them to become cogs in the social machine. When the traditional avenues of upward mobility are monopolized, crime becomes the only option for the underclass to break through the hierarchy of needs, but at the cost of a complete breakdown of humanity and morality. Adiga takes this opportunity to criticize the systematic distortion of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in Indian society - there is no romantic narrative of the pursuit of self-actualization, but only the dark reality of either being a slave or a murderer. Balram's success is not a validation of Maslow's theory, but a sharp irony of its idealized framework.

References

- Adiga, A. (2008). *The White Tiger*. Los Angeles: Free Press. Print.
- Cristina Mendes, A. (2010). Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 45(2), 275-293. Print. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989410366896>
- Mendes, C. (2010). *Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger* (45(2), pp. 25-40). Print. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989410366896>
- Walther, S. (2014). Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. *Modern Fiction Studies*, 60(3), 579-598. Print. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2014.0042>