

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

Vol. 16 Issue-5 october 2025

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor: Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

The Cultural Logic of the Rooster Coop: A Jamesonian Reading of *The White Tiger*

Siddarth B Mahajan
Postgraduate Student,
Department of English and Cultural Studies,
Christ University.

Article History: Submitted-09/09/2025, Revised-17/10/2025, Accepted-27/10/2025, Published-31/10/2025.

Abstract:

Fredric Jameson describes postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” where economic systems extend beyond markets to shape everyday thought and emotion. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* captures this reality in post-liberalized India through Balram Halwai, a man who rises from poverty by embracing the ruthless logic of capitalism. His letters to the Chinese Premier blur confession and business proposal, reflecting a society where morality bends under market pressures. The novel’s central metaphor, the “Rooster Coop,” exposes how control operates through illusion—the poor internalize their servitude in the name of freedom. Adiga’s fragmented, ironic narrative embodies Jameson’s ideas of the “waning of affect” and “depthlessness,” revealing a culture built on surfaces and imitation. This paper argues that *The White Tiger* offers a compelling literary map of India’s encounter with global capitalism, where ambition replaces empathy and survival becomes the highest virtue.

Keywords: *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga, Postmodernism, Fredric Jameson, Late Capitalism, Indian English Fiction.

Introduction

We live in a time when change feels constant. The lines separating cultures, economies, and even personal identities have become increasingly thin. Technology and globalization bring people closer while also making life more fragmented and uncertain. Literature, as always, mirrors this restlessness. It no longer seeks a single truth but tries instead to capture how people move through a world that is constantly shifting under their feet. This condition of uncertainty is what thinkers have come to call postmodernism—a cultural moment where older beliefs about truth, morality, and stability begin to dissolve. Instead of coherence, we encounter multiplicity; instead of permanence, we find flux. Human identity itself becomes fluid, shaped by markets, media, and the pressure to keep reinventing oneself.

Fredric Jameson, one of the key cultural theorists of our time, defines postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism.” For him, the market’s influence extends beyond economics into the imagination, emotions, and even private thought. People begin to live on the surface, guided by images and desires rather than conviction or moral depth. Jameson calls this the “waning of affect,” a phrase that captures how emotional life is flattened in an age when everything—from art to identity—can be packaged, sold, and consumed. In such a world, authenticity itself becomes difficult to recognize.

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) vividly brings this condition to life within the social and moral landscape of twenty-first-century India. Set in the years following economic liberalization, the novel portrays a country chasing prosperity while wrestling with deep inequality. Its narrator, Balram Halwai, begins as a poor villager but rises to success in Bengaluru by murdering his employer. His story, told through a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, reads like both a confession and a business plan. Balram’s tone—sharp, ironic, and

disturbingly self-aware—captures the mindset of a man who treats morality as a luxury he cannot afford. For him, ambition and survival are the only truths that matter.

Through Balram, Adiga explores what happens when traditional values collapse under the weight of capitalism. The “Rooster Coop” becomes a haunting image of this society—a system where the oppressed police themselves, trapped by the illusion of loyalty and hope. The novel’s fragmented, letter-based form mirrors the postmodern world Jameson describes: restless, self-conscious, and caught between irony and despair.

This paper reads *The White Tiger* through Jameson’s lens of postmodernism and late capitalism. It argues that Adiga’s novel reveals how globalization reshapes identity, emotion, and ethics in contemporary India. By tracing Balram’s journey from servitude to self-made success, the study shows how Adiga’s fiction transforms the Indian dream into a mirror of a larger global condition—one where success demands both ambition and moral surrender.

Theoretical Framework

Fredric Jameson’s theory of postmodernism offers one of the most influential ways to understand how culture and economy intertwine in the modern world. In his landmark study *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), Jameson argues that postmodernism is not merely an artistic style but the cultural condition of a world shaped by advanced capitalism. It is an age in which the logic of the market extends beyond economics, influencing not only how we work or consume but also how we think, imagine, and feel. Under such conditions, art and literature cease to exist outside the marketplace; they become part of the same system of production and desire that drives everyday life.

For Jameson, postmodern culture is defined by what he calls “depthlessness” and the “waning of affect.” These terms describe a world where emotion and meaning seem to have thinned out. People increasingly experience reality through images and simulations rather than direct contact or deep feeling. The passionate moral or psychological struggles that once shaped modernist works are replaced by irony, playfulness, and surface brilliance. In this flattened world, individuals appear fragmented — constantly adjusting to new social and economic pressures, rarely stable enough to form a coherent sense of self. The result is a culture that feels restless yet curiously detached, aware of its own emptiness but unable to move beyond it.

Another key concept in Jameson’s framework is pastiche, which he distinguishes from parody. Pastiche is imitation without satire — a blending of different voices and styles with no firm moral or ideological center. Postmodern art, he suggests, often recycles the past in fragments, turning history into a stylistic resource rather than a field of reflection. In a culture driven by consumption, even rebellion or critique can be absorbed and sold back as aesthetic experience. Everything becomes a potential commodity, including dissent.

Central to Jameson’s approach is the idea of the “political unconscious” — the notion that every cultural text, whether it knows it or not, contains traces of the economic and historical forces that produced it. Literature, then, becomes a space where ideology is both revealed and disguised, offering insight into the tensions of its time.

Jameson’s ideas are particularly relevant to contemporary Indian fiction, which has been deeply shaped by globalization and liberalization since the 1990s. Economic reform opened the country to new markets, technologies, and aspirations, but it also intensified inequality and moral ambiguity. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* captures these contradictions vividly. Balram Halwai, its ambitious narrator, embodies the postmodern subject that Jameson describes — a man who

reinvents himself in a world where survival depends on adaptability, not conviction. Reading the novel through Jameson's lens allows us to see it not only as a story about class mobility or corruption but also as a portrait of how late capitalism reshapes the very structure of identity, emotion, and narrative itself.

Literature Review

Since its publication in 2008, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* has generated a wide and evolving body of criticism that reflects India's shifting place in the global order. Early readings approached the novel as a realist narrative that exposes the moral collapse of India's emerging capitalist class, while later critics began to explore its postmodern and intertextual dimensions. One of the earliest studies, published in 2014 in *IJELLH* and titled *An Intertextual Reading of Arvind Adiga's Novel The White Tiger*, examined how Adiga borrows from a range of texts—*The Invisible Man*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Aesop's Fables*—as well as popular Indian films such as *Page 3* and *Chachi 420*. These references, the study argues, help Adiga construct a layered vision of modern India that is both ironic and self-reflective. By situating *The White Tiger* within a postmodern framework of parody and cultural pastiche, the paper identifies how Adiga uses familiar stories to expose India's fractured moral landscape. Much of this early work, then, focused on form and style, treating Adiga's narrative technique as part of a wider global postmodern conversation.

By the late 2010s, however, the focus of criticism began to shift from style to social structure. Shikha Shukla (2020) describes the novel as “a live picture of the ugly face of globalization and urbanization which is sucking the blood of the downtrodden” (953). Her analysis highlights Adiga's sharp contrast between “men of big bellies and men of small bellies,” a

metaphor that captures how economic liberalization has deepened class inequality. In a similar spirit, S. Sakthivel and S. Ganesan (2022) underline how “the fruits of progress have not reached the poor still languishing in backward parts of India” (2212). Both studies reveal how Adiga’s vision of modern India questions the optimism surrounding globalization and growth, exposing the persistence of social and economic hierarchies beneath the rhetoric of progress.

More recent scholarship has developed this argument further by linking globalization to changes in morality and identity. Amar Shankar Mahato (2023) notes that *The White Tiger* “offers a scathing critique of India’s social class dynamics in the era of globalization,” capturing how ambition and exploitation have become normalized in a competitive capitalist order (26). Similarly, Uttam Poudel (2023) interprets Balram’s violent ascent as an expression of “structural violence inherent in socio-political and economic disparities” (36). For Poudel, Balram’s immorality is not simply personal but systemic—a symptom of a social structure that rewards corruption and punishes obedience.

At the same time, critics outside India have turned their attention to how Adiga’s novel functions in the global literary marketplace. Ana Cristina Mendes (2010) situates *The White Tiger* within what she calls the “global literary marketplace,” arguing that Western readers are particularly drawn to its portrayal of “Dark India” (280). Her analysis suggests that Adiga’s narrative itself becomes a cultural commodity—produced, marketed, and consumed through the very circuits of late capitalism it critiques.

More recently, the 2024 article *Breaking the Chains: Identity and Cultural Rebellion in Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger* reads the novel as part of India’s ongoing negotiation with modernity. The study identifies Balram as a postcolonial subject who “constructs identity through rebellion rather than tradition,” framing him as both a product of and a rebel against globalization.

Taken together, these works trace the evolution of *The White Tiger* scholarship—from early discussions of postmodern narrative technique, through critiques of globalization and class, to contemporary debates about morality and identity. Yet, despite this range, few critics have read Adiga through the lens of Fredric Jameson’s theory of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism. This study builds on existing research by applying Jameson’s framework to connect the novel’s moral, social, and narrative layers, arguing that Balram Halwai exemplifies the postmodern subject molded by global capitalism.

Analysis / Discussion:

1. The Waning of Affect and the Postmodern Subject

One of the most striking ideas in Fredric Jameson’s theory of postmodernism is what he calls the “waning of affect.” It refers to a cultural condition where deep emotions such as guilt, empathy, or moral responsibility give way to detachment and pragmatic self-interest. In the postmodern world, feelings are replaced by attitudes; conviction by calculation. This transformation is not simply psychological but reflects the larger logic of late capitalism, where human relationships, like commodities, are governed by use and exchange value.

Adiga’s *The White Tiger* offers a vivid literary representation of this condition through its narrator and protagonist, Balram Halwai. Balram’s voice, shaped by both irony and cold reason, embodies a new kind of individual who is not haunted by moral conflict but guided by survival instinct. His first-person narration, structured as a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, is less a confession than a business proposal. He frames his life as a case study in entrepreneurship, where each act—including the murder of his employer—becomes part of a rational plan for success.

Balam's tone throughout the novel reveals the erosion of moral affect. When he describes the killing of Ashok, it is neither passionate nor remorseful. Instead, he speaks of it as a strategic step, a "business decision" necessary to escape servitude and enter the world of the powerful. This emotional detachment marks a complete shift from the modernist hero who wrestles with conscience and guilt. Balam, in contrast, feels no torment; he understands morality as an outdated constraint in a system driven by money and self-interest. His reflections after the murder focus not on sin or forgiveness but on logistics—how to evade the police, how to start a new company, how to manage risk.

As Amar Shankar Mahato (2023) notes, Balam's rise from the "darkness" of poverty to the "light" of success shows how globalization produces new subjects who measure worth entirely through capital. For Balam, emotion is replaced by ambition; empathy by strategy. He justifies every act as a response to the logic of the world around him. His detachment, therefore, is not an absence of feeling but a survival mechanism in a system where morality has no market value.

Kruti M. Trivedi (2016) insightfully observes that Adiga's journalistic background shapes the novel's style "as plain as news without sentimentality" (239). This cold, factual tone is not a failure of empathy but a deliberate choice. Adiga, as Trivedi points out, wanted to capture the voice of the "colossal underclass" without turning it into a moral or emotional spectacle (238–239). By stripping away sentiment, he exposes how the poor are forced to think pragmatically in a society that commodifies even their suffering.

Balam's rejection of familial bonds further reveals this waning of affect. His family, especially his grandmother, represents the emotional and moral weight of tradition, yet he sees them as obstacles to his freedom. When he abandons them, he accepts their likely destruction with

a chilling calm. His self-definition as an “entrepreneur” replaces kinship with competition, and morality with ambition. This loss of emotional depth parallels Jameson’s claim that under late capitalism, identity becomes surface-level—constructed through function, not feeling.

As Uttam Poudel (2023) argues, Balram’s moral numbness is a symptom of structural violence: “His crime arises not from passion but from a system that leaves no other route for dignity” (36). What seems like moral failure is in fact an adaptation to a dehumanizing order. Adiga thus presents a protagonist who, rather than rebelling against the system, internalizes its logic completely.

Halwai, then, is the perfect representative of the postmodern subject. He is not heroic, not tragic, but functional—an efficient product of the cultural logic of late capitalism. His success is proof that affect, empathy, and guilt have little place in a world where survival depends on assimilation. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga transforms Jameson’s abstract notion of the “waning of affect” into a human story, where detachment is not apathy but the price of ambition in a morally exhausted age.

2. Depthlessness and the Society of the Spectacle

While Jameson’s “waning of affect” concerns the psychology of the postmodern individual, his idea of depthlessness extends that condition to the structure of society itself. In a postmodern world, meaning no longer grows out of history or inner depth but out of appearance. What matters is how things look, how they circulate, and how they can be consumed. This is what Jameson describes as a culture of surfaces, where images and commodities replace authentic

experience. Jean Baudrillard expands this idea in his concept of the society of the spectacle—a world in which representation becomes more real than reality.

Adiga's *The White Tiger* brings this abstract theory to life. His India is not only divided by class but also saturated by spectacle. Balram lives in a landscape where visibility equals existence: “nothing is real unless it is represented through the lens of the camera,” as Uzma Abbas and Fakhra Jamil observe. The novel repeatedly shows how lives are shaped by how they appear to others rather than by what they actually are.

The most powerful metaphor for this condition is the “Rooster Coop.” Balram asks the reader to picture the chickens in Old Delhi's markets—“hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages... the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh” (Adiga 102). The birds can see and smell their own slaughter, yet they remain still. For Balram, this is India's social system in miniature. The poor, like the roosters, live trapped inside invisible cages built from fear and habit. They know they are exploited, yet the illusion of possible escape—the dream of becoming rich one day—keeps them compliant.

This metaphor transforms Jameson's “depthlessness” into something local and visible. Beneath India's shining image of success lies what Kruti Trivedi calls “the bitter reality of starving, poor and degraded India” hidden under the polished myth of progress. The spectacle of development—shopping malls, luxury cars, gated apartments—conceals the suffering that sustains it. Balram recognizes this duplicity when he drives his employer through the neon streets of Gurgaon: he can see both the glamour and the rot, but he learns that society only rewards the surface.

In such a world, identity itself becomes a commodity. Balram defines his worth not through character but through what he owns and serves. His connection to the Honda City is telling: he is the driver, yet, as Abbas and Jamil note, it is “the car that drives and directs Balram’s life.” The object becomes the subject, and Balram becomes its accessory. His aspiration is framed by brands, advertisements, and media images that promise transformation—fairness creams, English-language schools, and luxury lifestyles. These illusions sustain the capitalist dream while erasing individuality.

Amar Shankar Mahato (2023) observes that globalization in *The White Tiger* produces a culture where “people are compelled to measure success by the market’s standards.” Balram’s obsession with visibility and material success reflects this shift. When the police issue his “Wanted” poster, it appears as a “blurred, blackened, and smudged” photograph—a distorted copy of the man himself. The image fails to represent him because, in a depthless culture, the self can never be captured; it is always an imitation or performance. The poster, like the capitalist world it belongs to, turns the individual into a reproducible object, a symbol without substance.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga reveals a society where spectacle replaces substance and where control operates not through violence but through desire. People internalize the logic of the market, believing that their salvation lies in imitation and consumption. The Rooster Coop is thus not just a metaphor for social bondage but a mirror of postmodern India—a space where authenticity has vanished, leaving only images and illusions. Through this, Adiga exposes the depthlessness of a world that looks dazzling on the surface but is hollow within, perfectly embodying Jameson’s vision of the cultural logic of late capitalism.

3. Pastiche and the Narrative Form

Fredric Jameson describes pastiche as the dominant style of postmodern culture — a kind of “blank parody,” where artists borrow and recombine pre-existing styles without irony or moral center. In a world where originality itself has become impossible, creativity turns into collage. What once carried historical depth now exists as imitation and mixture, echoing the fragmented consciousness of late capitalism. In this sense, *The White Tiger* does not merely tell a story about globalization; it performs it through its structure and style. Aravind Adiga builds a narrative that refuses the smooth coherence of realism, opting instead for a shifting, self-aware form that mirrors the instability of postmodern identity.

The novel’s entire architecture — seven letters written by Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao — embodies this idea. The epistolary format immediately signals self-consciousness: the narrator knows he is constructing an image of himself for a specific audience. As Kruti M. Trivedi notes, the “epistolary form, containing seven letters each written in one night,” gives the novel both its rhythm and its ironic distance (239). Each letter becomes a stage on which Balram performs his identity — now as a murderer, now as a businessman, now as a philosopher of freedom. His storytelling blends confession, satire, business manual, and social critique, yet none of these genres fully dominate. This deliberate mixture exemplifies what Jameson calls pastiche: a neutral blending of voices and styles without stable hierarchy.

Balram’s voice shifts constantly in tone. At one moment he sounds like a comic narrator mocking his employers; at another, he speaks like an economist analyzing the “Rooster Coop” as a social system; elsewhere, he addresses Wen Jiabao as a fellow capitalist with advice on entrepreneurship. This tonal fluidity creates what Amar Shankar Mahato (2023) calls “a divided consciousness,” where Balram mirrors the contradictions of a society both proud of and trapped

by globalization. The voice of confession turns into advertisement, and moral reflection gives way to self-promotion.

This stylistic play has deeper implications. Trivedi argues that the “fragmented narration reflects the current socio-cultural scenario,” showing how narrative form itself becomes a mirror of India’s fractured social landscape. Similarly, Uzma Abbas and Fakhra Jamil describe the text’s “discontinuity” as a reflection of a “fragmented and split subject,” suggesting that Balram’s unstable storytelling corresponds to his unstable sense of self. His language borrows freely from media clichés, business jargon, and popular slogans — all part of what Jameson would call the “cultural logic” of late capitalism, where even personal stories sound like marketing campaigns.

In this way, Adiga transforms the postmodern idea of pastiche into a living form. The novel’s collage-like texture, with its uneven tones and intertextual references, refuses to resolve into a single meaning. It constantly reminds the reader that the world it depicts — the shiny, globalized India of call centers and luxury cars — is itself a patchwork of borrowed dreams and imported values. The result is a narrative that is as unstable and hybrid as the society it describes.

Balram’s letters are therefore not just a storytelling device; they are a commentary on storytelling itself. Each letter imitates a genre, recycles a voice, and yet fails to reach authenticity — much like Balram’s own search for success. His writing, like his morality, is a construction assembled from fragments of what he has seen and consumed. In this sense, *The White Tiger* becomes a metafictional performance of the postmodern condition, where selfhood, morality, and narrative are all products of imitation.

By using the very structure of his novel to dramatize this fragmentation, Adiga translates Jameson’s theory into literary experience. The form itself becomes an argument: that under late

capitalism, life — and storytelling — cannot be unified. Everything exists as collage, as simulation, as self-presentation. Through this hybrid narrative, Adiga reveals how deeply the logic of late capitalism penetrates both the structure of art and the structure of human identity.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* continues to speak powerfully to the India we live in today. Through Balram Halwai, Adiga shows how globalization and capitalism reshape not only the economy but also the way people think, feel, and define success. When Fredric Jameson spoke of postmodernism as “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” he described a world where everything—work, relationships, even morality—starts to follow the logic of the market. Adiga brings that world to life in the Indian context.

Balram is not just a character from a novel; he is the face of a new kind of individual who is constantly adjusting to survive in a competitive system. His actions, however extreme, reflect a society where ambition often replaces empathy, and where moral choices are shaped by economic need. The “Rooster Coop” that traps the poor in Adiga's story still exists, though it may look different now. In the shining offices and crowded streets of Bengaluru—the so-called Silicon Valley of India—the same contradictions remain: wealth beside poverty, opportunity beside exploitation, dreams beside disillusionment.

Reading *The White Tiger* through Jameson's lens helps us see these contradictions more clearly. It reminds us that capitalism is not only an economic system but a cultural force that shapes our desires and our sense of worth. Adiga's fragmented, letter-style narrative mirrors the fragmented realities of today's urban India, where people are constantly performing success, adapting, and re-inventing themselves.

This Jamesonian reading is important because it shows that Adiga's novel is not simply about crime or corruption—it is about the kind of world we are becoming. Bengaluru's glass towers and start-up dreams may look far removed from Balram's story, yet the same logic drives both: the need to rise, to compete, to be seen. *The White Tiger*, read through Jameson, helps us understand that behind the glitter of progress lies the emotional and moral cost of living in a world that never stops demanding performance.

Works Cited:

- Abbas, Uzma, and Fakhra Jamil. "Impact of Cultural Productions on Identity Construction in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Postmodern Study of Identity." *European Academic Research*, vol. 5, no. 10, Jan. 2018, pp. 5940–59.
- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. HarperCollins India, 2008.
- Choudhury, Monir. "Bringing 'India of Darkness' into Light: A Socio-political Study of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *English Language and Literature Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2023, pp. 45–56, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ells.v13n1p45>.
- IJELLH. "Intertextuality and Postmodernism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2014, pp. 214–22.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.

Mahato, Amar Shankar. "Globalization and Social Class in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*."

International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities, vol. 11, no. 7, July 2023, pp. 25–30, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8113472>.

Mendes, Ana Cristina. "Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*."

The Journal of Commonwealth Literature, vol. 45, no. 2, 2010, pp. 275–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989410366825>.

Poudel, Uttam. "Structural Violence in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." Literary Oracle, vol. 4, no. 2, 2023, pp. 34–42.

Sakthivel, S., and S. Ganesan. "Social Realism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." Journal of Positive School Psychology, vol. 6, no. 10, 2022, pp. 2211–16.

Shukla, Shikha. "The Impact of Globalization in Arvind Adiga's Novel *The White Tiger*." International Journal of Innovative Research in Technology, vol. 7, no. 5, 2020, pp. 952–54.

"The White Tiger: A Study in Social Change." The Context: A Journal of English Studies, vol. 10, no. 1, 2024, pp. 45–50, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15545075>.

Trivedi, Kruti M. "From Dark to Light: Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in a Postmodern Context."

International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR), vol. 3, no. 2, Apr.–June 2016, pp. 237–39.