DOI: 10.17846/aa-2025-17-2-52-75

"Rooster Coop" as an affective entrapment: Exploring "ugly feelings," caste, and the psychic violence of neoliberalism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:
This paper explores how Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger *(2008) dramatizes Balram Halwai's affective experience of caste oppression under neoliberal capitalism. It argues that the novel's central metaphor, the "Rooster Coop", represents not merely structural or material confinement but a form of affective entrapment that disciplines subaltern subjects through emotional entanglement. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's theorization of "ugly feelings" and placing it in dialogue with Indian anti-caste thinkers such as Gopal Guru, Sundar Sarukkai, and Anand Teltumbde, the paper conceptualizes the Rooster Coop as a caste-capital formation that produces what Ngai calls "obstructed agency". Through paradigms of affect theory, it underscores how Balram's resentment arises from caste-based humiliation, spiritual disillusionment, and familial constraints; his envy emanating from exclusion from consumer spaces and the privileges attached to upper-caste identity; and his anxiety from the precarity of neoliberal labour and fear of exposure. Furthermore, the paper contends that Balram's apparent rebellion – marked by the murder of his employer – fails to dismantle the "Rooster Coop" and instead reinscribes him into a new mode of servitude under neoliberal self-surveillance. The paper thus foregrounds affect as a critical site for understanding the psychic toll of caste-inflected neoliberalism in contemporary India.*

Introduction

Written in epistolary form, Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) traces the transformation of its protagonist, Balram Halwai, from a lower-caste tea-shop worker in the rural "Darkness" of Bihar to a morally compromised entrepreneur in the urban "Light" of Bangalore (Adiga, 2008, p. 14). While the novel portrays economic liberalization attenuating traditional caste hierarchies, Adiga's critique exposes a fundamental paradox in India's neoliberal transformation. Despite promises of individual mobility and meritocratic advancement, economic liberalization simultaneously reproduces and intensifies "the gridlocked social and economic hierarchies" through new mechanisms of exclusion (Detmers, 2011, p. 536). In his interview with the Man Booker Prize committee, Aravind Adiga stated that *The White Tiger* aimed to capture "the tension between those who have and those who don't" (The Booker Prizes, 2008, 2:55–2:57). Balram embodies this tension – even amid Delhi's neoliberal seductions, he remains tethered to the enduring caste and class boundaries. Adiga renders these contradictions visceral through Balram's simmering negative affects – resentment, envy, and anxiety – which signal both his psychic subjugation and desperate hunger for escape.

This paper contends that these affects form the psychological scaffolding of Balram's metaphorical "Rooster Coop" – a powerful symbol of systemic entrapment through which "a handful of men" keep the vast subaltern classes of India "in perpetual servitude" (Adiga, 2008, pp. 175–76). The coop represents not merely physical confinement but an internalized affective prison in which the oppressed absorb their subjugation and perform their own complicity, watching passively as others like them are sacrificed. Balram's loyalty to his employers – shaped by generations of caste-based discipline and reinforced through fear, gratitude, and habituated servitude – intensifies his entrapment. This loyalty, along with its attendant affects – resentment, envy, and anxiety – forms the very bars of the Rooster Coop, producing what Sara D Schotland calls "a Manichean duality of rich/master/powerful and poor/servant/oppressed" (2011, p. 1). The coop thus emerges as the embodied infrastructure of "affective entrapment" (emphasis ours): a structure in which the emotional life of the oppressed becomes instrumental in sustaining the very system that subjugates them.[1] We further argue that Balram's violent rupture of the Rooster Coop – through the murder of his employer, Mr Ashok – does not achieve liberation but rather institutes a chimeric form of autonomy. His ascension to entrepreneurial status within Bangalore's neoliberal "Light" (emphasis ours) offers no existential reprieve. Instead, the corrosive fear of discovery becomes inseparable from – and indistinguishable from – the anxieties endemic to the neoliberal subject: the fear of status

loss, the dread of stagnation, and the hollowing loneliness engendered by hyper-individualism. Thus, Balram's entrepreneurial rise within Bangalore's neoliberal economy registers as a hollow performance – "complete only for the outer world and not for Balram himself" (Shetty et al., 2012, p. 284) – masking an unresolved interior unease. Therefore, Balram's affective landscape – transcending individual psychology – materializes as a symptom of the deeper structural violence inherent in the persistent caste-capital nexus under neoliberal conditions.

To decipher the affective architecture of Balram's entrapment, this analysis turns to Sianne Ngai's theory of "ugly feelings" as a critical conceptual lens. Emerging from the same early 21st-century milieu shaped by neoliberal restructuring and post-Fordist labour regimes, Ngai's theoretical work and Adiga's novel both attend to the psychic costs of inhabiting worlds structured by systemic inequality, stalled mobility, and suspended agency. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai theorizes a repertoire of non-cathartic, "explicitly amoral" affects – envy, irritation, anxiety, animatedness – that do not culminate in resolution or redemptive moral clarity but persist as corrosive, often self-consuming, residues of life under late capitalism (Ngai, 2005, pp. 6–7). These "ugly feelings," symptomatic of what she terms "obstructed agency" (Ngai, 2005, 3), signal how individuals are enmeshed in systems demanding their participation but denying them genuine autonomy. Ngai's framework thus proves especially apt for scrutinizing the negative affects – resentment, envy, and anxiety – that structure Balram's inner life in an increasingly neoliberalizing India. As Anand Teltumbde argues, this neoliberal India remains a "republic of caste," where the state has been "constructed on the foundation of caste" and where globalization has not dismantled caste hierarchies but rather "colluded with the market to speak the language of [Hindu] majoritarianism" (2018, pp. 13–14). In *The White Tiger*, Balram's narrative pulses with such emotions: his resentment festers under the daily humiliations he suffers as a servant and the constraints imposed by familial obligation; his envy crystallizes around the inaccessible privileges of his employers; and his pervasive anxiety – about regressing into rural obscurity and about the potential exposure of his crime – exemplifies the kind of non-cathartic affects that, as Ngai notes, possess "remarkable capacity for duration" (2005, p. 7). By tracing how Balram's ugly feelings are produced, circulated, and instrumentalized within a caste-capitalist order, this paper foregrounds the affective architecture of neoliberal subjectivity, where systemic inequality is reframed as a personal failure, and subjugation is lived through aspiration, self-surveillance, and emotional endurance.

Unpacking the politics of "ugly feelings"

To grasp the emotional terrain of Balram Halwai's transformation, it is vital to turn to Sianne Ngai's theorization of "ugly feelings" as an interpretive framework that foregrounds the affective aftermath of stalled agency under neoliberal conditions. In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai departs from Aristotelian grand and cathartic emotions like rage or melancholia – traditionally valorised in political and aesthetic theory – to focus instead on a repertoire of "*a*moral and *non*cathartic" (2005, p. 6) affects such as "envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplimity, paranoia, and disgust" (p. 32). These emotions are not moralized or cathartic; they "offer no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" but persist in a suspended, corrosive emotional state (Ngai, 2005, p. 6). Crucially, she characterizes these affects as symptomatic of what she calls "obstructed agency" (2005, p. 3 – a condition in which subjects are incited to act within systems that simultaneously foreclose real action or autonomy, leading to "a failure of emotional release" (p. 9). This contradiction defines the condition of the marginalized subject interpellated by neoliberalism – a subject lured by promises of mobility yet compelled to internalize structural inequalities as personal shortcomings. Their emotional life becomes saturated with lingering, dysphoric affects that accumulate over time, shaping how power is psychically absorbed and endured.

Ngai's "ugly feelings", then, are not merely private, episodic moods; they are politically saturated affective states that index how structures of power infiltrate the intimate life of the subject. Unlike righteous anger, which aspires toward resolution, these "minor" affects "have managed to endure in a way that other feelings…have not" and are "filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally being, well, weaker and nastier" (Ngai, 2005, pp. 6-7). In other words, these feelings are more like rats and possums – sneaky, unpleasant, and petty emotions that, while not glamorous or empowering, still matter because they reveal how people internalize and endure oppressive conditions. In Balram's case, such feelings accumulate beneath the surface of servitude – a slow-burning sediment of resentment and anxiety that eventually ruptures into violence. What appears as a sudden, decisive act – the murder of Mr Ashok – is, in fact, the deferred discharge of prolonged affective compression. These "weaker and nastier" (Ngai, 2005, p. 7) feelings do not simply linger; they accumulate in Balram's psyche, festering through years of humiliation, envy, and anxious self-surveillance. Hence, the murder of Mr Ashok is not a spontaneous rebellion but the inevitable eruption of a life compressed by servitude and saturated with unresolvable emotional contradiction.

Historicizing transnational resonances between *Ugly Feelings* and *The White Tiger*: Affective life in caste-inflected neoliberal India

While Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* (2005) emerges from a North American cultural-theoretical milieu, its relevance to Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) can be historically justified by considering the global synchrony of neoliberal transformations and their psychic effects. Rather than treating Ngai's framework as an external imposition, this paper argues that her theorization of "ugly feelings" as "unprestigious…*a*moral and *non*cathartic" affects – captures a transnational structure of feeling that surfaced in the early 2000s (2005, p. 6). This period was marked by escalating precarity, privatization, and emotional regulation across "all states that have taken the neoliberal road" (Harvey, 2005, p. 76). Ngai's concepts thus resonate with how affect became both a target and product of neoliberal restructuring, not only in the West but also in post-liberalization India.

Ngai's work, written in the aftermath of 9/11 and the dot-com collapse, critiques the cultural logic of American post-Fordist capitalism, where flexibility, affective labour, and self-management became the "very lubricants of the economic system" (2005, p. 4). These shifts, however, were not confined to the United States. Following its 1991 economic liberalization, India's trajectory witnessed an acceleration of market logic, deregulation, and global investment during the 2000s (Oza, 2006; Chatterjee, 2008). This transformation was particularly visible in urban centres like Delhi and Bangalore – spaces prominently featured in *The White Tiger*. By the end of the novel, Balram becomes a business owner in Bangalore – India's tech capital and a symbolic hub of global outsourcing. Notably, Bangalore was hit hard during the 2008 recession due to reduced Western demand, underscoring how the affective and economic insecurities that Ngai diagnoses were already globalized and materializing unevenly across postcolonial contexts. The historical coincidence of *Ugly Feelings* and *The White Tiger* is not merely chronological but symptomatic of tectonic economic shifts where global capital was turning into "the determining marker for belonging…[and] a matter of affect, a structure of feeling" (Lochner, 2014, p. 39). This convergence reveals how neoliberalism operates not just through policy and economics but through the emotional lives it shapes and disciplines. Both texts thus showcase the racialized subject as "excessively emotional" (Ngai, 2005, p. 7) while navigating uneven terrains of opportunity and exclusion.

Throughout *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai argues that American cultural discourse has long imagined the racialized subject as "an excessively emotional and expressive subject", a figure whose "'animatedness becomes especially problematic" because it reduces affect to a performance of exaggerated emotion while obscuring the subject's structural disempowerment (Ngai, 2005, p. 7). These racialized affects, she writes, reflect "a state of being 'puppeteered' that points to a specific history of systemic political and economic disenfranchisement" (2005,

p. 12). From these systemic impasses, she argues, arise various ugly feelings – including envy, resentment, irritation, anxiety, and animatedness – whose analysis is crucial for grasping "various kinds of symbolic struggle" (2005, p. 7). This framework is especially illuminating when transposed to the Indian context, where caste, like race, functions "as a social entity and is perceived through sensory modalities like touch, smell, taste, sound, and sight" (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019, p. 80). Regarding the amalgamation between caste and globalization, Anand Teltumbde rightly notes: "The ideology of castes, having proven itself more than any other in the world in holding the masses in submission to the system of their own exploitation, can promise to complement the ISA [Ideological State of Apparatus]" (2010, p. 110). Dalits and other lower caste subjects often experience this brutal discrimination, as they are invited into neoliberal modernity through discourses of meritocracy and individualism, yet constantly reminded of their "caste and class difference" (Subramanian, 2019, p. 202) through "economic inequalities and social exclusions (Jodhka, 2018, p. 48). In *The White Tiger*, Balram's cynical narration is riddled with anxieties, envy, and amorphous resentment –ugly feelings that mark his status as a "half-baked fellow" (Adiga, 2008, p. 11) of India's post-liberalization dream. As Alexander Adkins aptly observes, these affects "generate and respond to the increasing fragility, vulnerability, and disposability of life in our contemporary moment" (2019, p. 178), laying bare the contradictory demands of neoliberal aspiration and caste-based exclusion that define Balram's condition. In this sense, Balram's narrative becomes a site where affective residues of systemic violence are registered, distorted, and weaponized in pursuit of mobility.

Such a reading invites us to extend Sianne Ngai's theorization of affect as a terrain of structural subjugation by placing it in dialogue with Indian thinkers who foreground the emotional architectures of caste. Ngai's account of "ugly feelings" – affects that "do not inspire cathartic action" but instead register "a suspended agency" (Ngai, 2005, 6) – finds a compelling parallel in Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's description of "caste as carapace" (2019, p. 76). Dalits, they write, "struggle to not be Dalit and yet cannot avoid being a Dalit" in neoliberal India (2019, p. 77). The carapace is a fitting metaphor: it protects even as it constrains, producing a form of emotional containment that mirrors Ngai's model of "obstructed agency" (2005, p. 3). Guru and Sarukkai further highlight how caste generates a "gross deficit of social trust" and is perpetuated by "passive injustice" – a systemic indifference that disables meaningful responses from lower castes and thus contributes to their suspended agency (2019, p. 78). Caste, they write, "envelops you… it hugs you. It does everything in excess. It can suffocate as well as support" (2019, p. 81). This affective suffocation cultivates a climate in which envy, anxiety, and resentment sediment into chronic emotional responses experienced

by lower castes – psychic residues of caste's everyday performance of humiliation and blocked agency. Hence, Sianne Ngai's concept of "obstructed agency" (2005, p. 3) – where the subject is aware of structural constraints yet unable to act meaningfully—offers a powerful lens to understand the affective condition of lower caste subjects in caste society.

Furthermore, Ngai's theorization of "ugly feelings" offers a powerful lens to apprehend the banal yet bruising psychic toll of caste. These "non-cathartic" affects, she writes, do not culminate in "satisfactions of virtue" (2005, p. 7) or moral clarity but instead persist as affective residues of "situations marked by blocked or thwarted action in particular" (p. 27). In the Indian context – where caste violence is rendered both in hyper-visible spectacles and in microaggressive, everyday acts – Ngai's framework helps foreground the slow violence and quotidian humiliations that structure lower-caste life, especially in the aftermath of economic liberalization. Caste in contemporary India is "a sense of identity internalised over time," cultivated through "a profound sense of pride or shame" (Bhoi & Gorringe, 2023, p. x) by dominant castes, which often produces what Cháirez-Garza terms "self-racialization" (2021, p. 230).[2] In such a climate, emotions like resentment, envy, and anxiety are not apolitical residues – they are the affective sediments of systemic exclusion. Balram's narrative voice in *The White Tiger* becomes a reservoir for precisely these ugly feelings filtered through his embittered but observant consciousness. His sarcastic tone and obsessive self-fashioning are not simply signs of defiance but evidence of emotional exhaustion and psychic abrasion. In the following sections, we engage in a nuanced interrogation of Balram's resentment, envy, and anxiety, contending that these affective states function as critical sites of negotiation through which his psychological interiority reflects and contests the entrenched structural asymmetries of the socioeconomic hierarchy.

Resentment

Resentment, in everyday discourse, is commonly understood as an affective response characterized by displeasure arising from experiences of offence, insult, or injustice, which simultaneously demands that the perpetrators endure "some bad consequences." (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 5). Looking at how resentment operates in modern democracies under neoliberalism, Jeremy Engels observes: "Resentment is an emotion foundational to democratic politics…because power is never distributed equally throughout society and citizens are rarely given access to all they need to thrive" (2015, p. 11). This formulation underscores the premise that resentment fundamentally emerges from the asymmetrical allocation of power. Sianne Ngai, while not directly theorizing resentment, explores its proximity to what she calls "ugly

feelings" such as envy, irritation, and paranoia – affects bound to "the general situation of obstructed agency" (2005, pp. 13–14). She notes that although these feelings may superficially resemble Nietzsche's account of *ressentiment* as a "vengefulness of the impotent" (1989, p. 37), they resist its core moralizing thrust. In contrast to Nietzsche's framing of *ressentiment* as a reactive force that, unable to act directly, channels frustration into "an imaginary revenge" and thereby gives rise to "slave morality" (1989, p. 36),[3] Ngai emphasizes the diagnostic potential of these non-cathartic affects. They are not affirmations of moral superiority but rather registrations of systemic powerlessness and suspended agency. She argues that rather than seeking to eliminate resentment, its presence should become a critical lens through which we can discern the "increasing anti-utopian and functionally differentiated society" (Ngai, 2005, p. 3).

In the novel, Balram's resentment emerges not as a personal character flaw but as the inevitable psychological product of what Anand Teltumbde identifies as the "republic of caste" – a condition in which neoliberalism, with its social Darwinist ethos that "favours the strong and condemns the poor as uncompetitive" (2018, p. 183), has proven to be "injurious to people in inverse proportion to their social standing" (2018, p. 23). Surinder S. Jodhka extends this critique of neoliberal India's meritocratic claims, arguing that caste functions as "a form of capital, whose value depends on where one is located in the traditional hierarchy" (2018, p. xxi). For Jodhka, caste is not a relic of the past but an active force that "inhibits their [lower castes'] participation in the emergent [neoliberal] structures of opportunity" (2018, p. xx), thereby enabling "the reproduction of caste" (2018, p. 230). Trapped between the seductive promise of merit-based mobility and the persistent barriers of caste-based exclusion, Balram's resentment crystallizes as an affective response to a neoliberal order that marginalizes "those living chronically without access to necessities and a minimally dignified human existence" (Anwer, 2014, p. 305).

From the very beginning of *The White Tiger*, Adiga foregrounds socioeconomic powerlessness as a generative source of Balram's resentment. Through Balram's journey from a caste-ridden village to neoliberal cities, Adiga invites readers to peek into the stark inequalities of rapidly globalizing India. In his sardonic opening address to the Chinese premier, Balram immediately establishes his position as both critic and participant in India's contradictory modernization: "And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them" (Adiga, 2008, p. 4). The deliberate juxtaposition between the absence of basic amenities and the presence of neoliberal

entrepreneurs reveals a psychological splitting that defines Balram's consciousness – his ability to simultaneously inhabit the role of a successful entrepreneur while cataloguing "the emergent disparities of the new economy" (Jodhka, 2018, p. xxii).

Furthermore, Balram's early encounter with religious ideology through his mother's cremation represents a crucial moment where personal trauma transforms into systemic critique, revealing how resentment operates as "a judgment of moral wrong" (Engels, 2015, p. 25). His visceral description of the scene – "This mud was holding her back: this big, swelling mound of black ooze... Nothing would get liberated here" (Adiga, 2008, pp. 17–18) – illuminates the chasm between religious promise and material reality. Balram's resentment here takes the form of what Sianne Ngai describes as a diagnostic feeling – an affect whose "diagnostic nature" (2005, p. 5) lies in its capacity to "render visible different registers of problem", particularly those rooted in structural contradiction and suspended agency (p. 3). Although his mother's life was marked by devout piety and hardship, even death denies her dignity. This moment deepens Balram's cynicism and reflects a broader anti-caste resentment toward Hindu religious doctrines that fail to offer genuine solace or emancipation to the oppressed. As a member of the lower-caste Halwai community,[4] Balram harbours a deep-seated resentment toward the systemic injustices entrenched within the Hindu caste order. This animus often surfaces in his sardonic commentary on religious belief and ritual, revealing their complicity in reinforcing caste hierarchies. In one such moment of irreverent critique, he remarks: "It's true that all these gods seem to do awfully little work—much like our politicians—and yet keep winning reelection to their golden thrones in heaven, year after year" (Adiga, 2008, p. 8). Here, Balram draws a scathing parallel between divine and political authority, implying that both operate as self-perpetuating structures of power, immune to scrutiny or accountability. His mockery of divine indolence thus registers not as flippant humour but as a profound disillusionment with a religious order that, rather than offering transcendence, legitimizes the socioeconomic subordination of lower castes like his own.

It is worth noting that Balram is praised in school as a "White Tiger" (Adiga, 2008, p. 35) with tremendous potential, only to be pulled out and made to work as a menial labourer in a tea shop. This abrupt shift – from symbolic exception to despised "coal breaker" (Adiga, 2008, p. 37) – embodies what Sianne Ngai terms "obstructed agency" (2005, p. 3), a condition in which lower-caste students like Balram are hailed to aspire or act while being systematically denied the structural means for meaningful intervention. The jarring contradiction between recognition and relegation reveals not just a personal setback but a structural affect – where possibility is dangled only to be foreclosed. This educational rupture operates through temporal

compression: Balram's identity transforms overnight from rare intellectual promise to manual labourer due to family indebtedness. The emotional significance lies not merely in downward mobility but in the revelation that merit functions as ideological cover for predetermined caste outcomes.

While navigating the neoliberal space of Delhi as a driver of Mr Ashok, the Stork's son, Balram is frequently reminded of his inferior social standing by his employers. His interactions with Mr.= Ashok and Pinky Madam, especially during his duty as a chauffeur in Delhi, expose what Yashpal Jogdand terms "the mental image"[5] (2023, p. 44) harboured by the upper castes about the lower castes. His mispronunciation of English words like "mall" and "pizza" becomes a source of amusement for Mr Ashok and his wife, underscoring the cultural and linguistic stratification that exists within the caste system. This seemingly minor humiliation of Balram's mispronunciation resonates with arguments advanced by Kancha Ilaiah regarding prejudice held by the dominant castes about the inability of lower castes to acquire proficiency in English (1996, p. 56). Similarly, Balram endures constant verbal abuse and name-calling from Mr Ashok's brother, the Mongoose. He abuses him with pejorative terms like "moron" and "idiot" (Adiga, 2008, p. 122). Alongside this, he is subjected to humiliating tasks such as massaging the Stork's dirty feet and physical punishments from both the Mongoose and the Stork for even minor errors. Yashpal Jogdand's concept of "caste microaggression" is very apt here to understand how these insults of Balram create "a humiliating affective climate" (2023, p. 44).[6] According to Jogdand, caste-based humiliation in contemporary India can be broadly categorized into two forms: "the extreme (caste atrocities) and less extreme (caste microaggressions)" (2023, p. 37). In *The White Tiger*, Balram frequently encounters this "less extreme" form of caste humiliation through the everyday insults and indignities inflicted by his upper-caste employers. These include seemingly minor yet cumulatively damaging acts such as mockery, verbal abuse, and the imposition of demeaning tasks. Such experiences reflect what Guru calls "a mental/psychological injury that leaves a permanent scar" (2009, p. 16), showing how caste microaggressions – though subtle – cause deep harm in neoliberal India, as seen in Balram's lived experiences.

Furthermore, Balram's metaphor of Delhi divided into "two separate cities—inside and outside the dark egg" (Adiga, 2008, p. 138) shows how resentment becomes a bodily response to neoliberal urbanization, working through what we call "affective entrapment" (emphasis ours). This metaphorical "dark egg" encapsulates the divergent living conditions co-existing within the metropolis, where "the rich people live in big housing colonies" (Adiga, 2008, p. 118) and the "multitudes of small, thin, grimy people" are forced to inhabit the pavements or

overcrowded slum areas after migrating from the rural "Darkness" (Adiga, 2008, p. 138). His liminal role as a driver grants him access to elite spaces without granting entry into elite status, producing psychological contradictions that surface in his hallucinated vision of his deceased father "sitting on that pavement, cooking some rice gruel for dinner" (Adiga, 2008, p. 138). This temporal collapse – where past and present coalesce– exemplifies what Teresa Brennan calls the "noncorrespondence between thought and feeling", where emotions "attach themselves with equal intensity to various thoughts" regardless of their origin or proportionality (2004, p. 7). His emotions do not emerge from personal failures but from what Raju J Das calls "spatial unevenness at multiple scales" (2012) of India's New Economic Policy (NEP). In this sense, Balram's psychological burden is inseparable from material conditions; his resentment is not simply personal but indexes systemic contradictions that displace political critique into individualized despair. Balram's hallucinated vision of his father emerges as a visceral, physiological reaction to environmental stress, becoming what Brennan calls a "biological transmission" that "alters the biochemistry and neurology of the subject" (2004, p. 14), circulating within him as a somatic critique of spatial injustice.

While Balram clearly perceives the spatial and economic injustice structuring Delhi, his survival tactics – such as secretly using the Honda City as an illicit taxi, forging petrol bills, siphoning fuel, reselling refilled liquor bottles, colluding with corrupt mechanics, and performing strategic obedience – propel him toward internalizing neoliberal ideology, a shift characterized by what Swaralipi Nandi calls "extreme self-centeredness and a complete dismissal of calls for participation in social groups" (2017, p. 287). Balram's gradual internalization of neoliberal ideology – predicated on individualism, corruption, and upward mobility – manifests most starkly through his deepening resentment toward "the normative codes of morals and ethics" during his visit to Laxmangarh (Detmers, 2011, p. 543). More than an emotional response, this resentment functions as a disruptive force aimed at the collectivist and endogamous structures that sustain intergenerational poverty. When Balram sees Kishan as "thinner, and darker, [with] his neck tendons...sticking out in high relief above the deep clavicles" (Adiga, 2008, pp. 84-85), he is confronted with the bodily cost of familial sacrifice: to keep the family afloat, men must work themselves into depletion with no hope of escape. This moment crystallizes his growing conviction that the very networks meant to protect – especially the family – are mechanisms of the Rooster Coop itself, a realization he voices with biting sarcasm in his remark to the Premier: "*the Indian family*, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop" (Adiga, 2008, p. 176). His all-encompassing resentment extends to the pressure to marry and reproduce within caste-endogamous lines – a system that preordains

one's future and curtails individual potential (Khor 2012). His refusal to marry the girl his grandmother arranged is a direct rejection of "the short-term benefits of sex and a dowry" promised by Indian endogamous marriage (Khor, 2012, p. 51). His rebellion – flinging a plate and shouting, "I said, I'm not marrying!" (Adiga, 2008, p. 85) – transcends mere defiance; it is a violent discharge of the accumulated resentment bred by the material burdens of kinship, caste, and duty. Thus, neoliberalism creeps into Balram's psyche not just as economic aspiration but as a moral and affective orientation structured by resentment towards "family bonds, family allegiance, and family obligation" that threatens to hinder his imagined future (Want, 2011, p. 75).

Envy

Sianne Ngai, in her nuanced exploration of envy, posits that there is a pervasive tendency to pathologize and morally condemn this complex emotion "even though it remains the only agonistic emotion defined as having a perceived inequality as its object" (2005, p. 128). She argues that by framing envy as an inherently negative emotion, societal discourses have effectively neutralized its "ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of inequality" (2005, p. 129). Furthermore, Ngai challenges traditional feminist psychoanalytic frameworks for relying on Freud's notion of "penis envy", which, she argues, reduces envy to a narrow, gendered concept. She critiques the prevailing interpretation that positions envy as emanating from perceived "lacks" within a subject or solely determined by the "subject's internal state of affairs" (2005, p. 126). Such an interpretation, as Ngai argues, fails to acknowledge the pivotal role of social structures and power imbalances in shaping and conditioning individuals' experiences of envy.

Mari Ruti's theoretical framework can complement and expand the understanding put forth by Ngai, particularly through its emphasis on symbolic privilege and gendered authority. In *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings*, Ruti reworks Freud's concept of penis envy, arguing that both women and men are affected by "the cultural fetishization of the penis" (2018, p. xxiii). Like Ngai, she emphasizes that penis envy does not concern a biological organ but "the social privilege it signifies" (2018, p. ix). For Ruti, this symbolic privilege reveals the structures of "phallic—heteropatriarchal—authority" (2018, p. x), which may lead "many men [to] suffer from penis envy just as much as women do" (2018, p. x). While Ruti is a Western thinker working primarily within Euro-American contexts, her insights can be productively extended to examine male-male relations across caste lines in India. The upper-caste male figure, in this context, embodies more than economic capital; he signifies cultural legitimacy and social

authority within neoliberal spaces. As Shalu Nigam aptly notes, "patriarchy, religious hegemony, casteism, and wealth inequalities, all operate together to reinforce the culture of domination" (2016, p. 1), consolidating the power of "Brahmins over Dalits, upper caste over lower caste" (p. 14). In this context, envy functions as an affective response to the interlocking structures of caste and gender domination, wherein marginalized men – confronted with the symbolic capital accrued by upper-caste masculinity – aspire not simply to economic mobility, but to the cultural legitimacy and social authority it confers.

In *The White Tiger*, neoliberal Delhi becomes the crucible for Balram's envy, catalysing his transformation from a subservient servant into an ambitious *homo economicus*.[7] David Harvey defines neoliberalism as a system that aims to advance "human well-being" through "individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2005, p. 2). However, in the Indian context, neoliberalism does not unsettle entrenched caste hierarchies. As Teltumbde observes, neoliberalism lacks "any conflictual attitude towards the caste system"; instead, "it aggravates existing caste relations" (2010, p. 104). Balram's trajectory exemplifies this paradox, as his rise is not a story of egalitarian opportunity but one marked by envy, dispossession, and the violent negotiation of structural inequality.

The city's luxury cars, high-end malls, and lavish parties contrast sharply with the limitations imposed by Balram's caste identity, fuelling his envy, particularly toward Mr Ashok, who epitomizes social privilege and affluence. As David Harvey argues, "the neoliberal state is necessarily hostile to all forms of social solidarity that put restraints on capital accumulation" (2005, p. 75), thereby reshaping social relations through its focus on individual gain. Similarly, Balram's devotion to his employers gradually gives way to an acute sense of envy as he becomes aware of the pervasive inequality that persists in neoliberal urban space. As the novel progresses, Balram becomes increasingly aware of his unsanitary living conditions – a cockroach-infested room and a shared public toilet in the servants' quarters – and of his exclusion from the allures of consumerist modernity, including giant shopping malls, luxurious amenities, and elitist spaces enjoyed by the upper classes, leaving him "increasingly disenchanted with his own status" (Nandi, 2017, p. 285). Notably, Adiga deftly connects Balram's feelings of exclusion from consumerist modernity with the experiences of other common citizens navigating the stratified landscape of neoliberal Delhi. In one of the telling anecdotes, Balram illustrates how a common man attempting to enter a shopping mall is denied entry based solely on his footwear:

> The glass doors had opened, but the man who wanted to go into them could not do so. The guard at the door had stopped him. He pointed his stick at the man's feet and shook his head—the man had sandals on his feet… Instead of backing off and going away—as nine in ten in his place would have done—the man in the sandals exploded, "Am I not a human being too?" (Adiga, 2008, p. 148)

Sara Ahmed's concept of "stranger danger" resonates with this anecdote. The denial of entry based on footwear enforces socioeconomic boundaries, marking the man in sandals as a "body out of place" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 15) in a consumerist space. For Ahmed, the term "stranger danger" refers to the perception of strangers as inherently threatening or dangerous not only to "valued dwellings and neighbourhoods" but also to "public life" (2000, p. 32). In this context, the mall – positioned as a key component of "public life" – becomes a site where the "legitimation of certain forms of mobility… and delegitimation of others" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 32) is actively enacted. The novel's portrayal of spatial discrimination reveals how caste-inflected neoliberalism produces a stratified urban landscape, where globalized spaces privilege the upper-caste bourgeoisie while excluding economically marginalized groups. Hence, daily newspapers' poignant rhetorical question – "Is There No Space for the Poor in the Malls of New India?" (Adiga, 2008, p. 148) – captures not just his personal alienation but also the collective marginalization of the poor subaltern people, who, like him, are made to feel perpetually "out of place" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 15) in the elite spaces of neoliberal urban India. The question becomes an affective echo of Balram's lived reality – marked by humiliation, resentment, and an acute awareness of his outsider status.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram's envy originates not solely from his interactions with the neoliberal milieu of Delhi but also from the socioeconomic capital conferred upon Mr Ashok and his family by virtue of their caste. While the Stork and the Mongoose represent toxic masculinity and traditional landlords, Mr Ashok embodies a comparatively progressive and empathetic disposition, evinced by his disapproval of his father's exploitative treatment of Balram. However, a closer textual analysis reveals that Mr Ashok's performance of masculinity, though mild-mannered on the surface, ultimately converges with the patriarchal and casteist impunity exemplified by his father and brother. In this regard, Alexander Adkins rightly notes: "He [Balram] finds himself caught between admiration and disgust for Mr Ashok who at first appears an honest capitalist, over the course of the novel becomes slovenly and corrupt" (2019, p. 182). Mr Ashok's routine participation in Delhi's corrupt political economy – delivering bribes to shield his family's coal business from taxes – exposes the emptiness of

his supposed modernity. His ability to circulate freely among bureaucrats and elites stems not only from wealth but also from what Mari Ruti (2018, p. xi) terms "phallic authority" – a form of caste-coded masculine dominance that bestows social and symbolic capital. Balram, though physically proximate to Mr Ashok, remains materially and symbolically excluded from the forms of power and legitimacy that Mr Ashok embodies. The city they both inhabit is not a shared space but a hierarchical one, where caste continues to determine visibility, mobility, and worth.

Initially, Balram internalizes his subordination, expressing it through reverence and loyalty. His affective attachment to Mr Ashok masks what Anand Teltumbde identifies as the fusion of "caste and capitalism" (2018, p. 14) that undergirds his servitude. However, as Balram observes Mr Ashok's effortless integration into elite Delhi society – and his own continued invisibility – his reverence begins to transform into envy. Mr Ashok's seamless access to Delhi's elite spaces – secured by caste privilege and capital – contradicts the structural exclusions that constrain Balram. What he once saw as personal inferiority is slowly revealed to be institutionalized inequality. This structural exclusion amplifies his envy, ultimately catalysing a moment of ethical rupture. As he watches Mr Ashok's habitual bribery, Balram reflects:

> And even if you were to steal it, Balram, it wouldn't be stealing. How so?... See—Mr. Ashok is giving money to all these politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay. And who owns that tax, in the end? Who but the ordinary people of this country—you!" (Adiga, 2008, p. 244)

At this moment, Balram's envy operates not as a personal failing but as a mode of political perception, sharpening his awareness of "the capitalist hierarchy of the purported 'new' India." His envy transforms into what Sianne Ngai describes as a "critical agency," capable of registering "real and institutionalized forms of inequality" (2005, p. 129). Similarly, it begins to mirror what Helmut Schoeck calls the engine of "social revolution... supported by the envy-motive" (1969, p. 331). For Balram, this marks a turning point, as envy no longer produces docility but instead gives rise to resentment – an affective recalibration that destabilizes his prior identification with servility.

By the time Balram resolves to kill Mr Ashok, the act no longer appears as a sudden transgression but as the inevitable culmination of what Adorno terms a *damaged life*[8] shaped by systemic injustice. His prolonged proximity to caste-coded capital – his daily immersion in

Mr Ashok's effortless access to wealth, legal impunity, and moral exemption – reveals a world in which ethical life is foreclosed in advance. In a social order where, as Adorno puts it, "wrong life cannot be lived rightly" (2005, p. 19) where justice is bartered through bribery and virtue collapses into property – Balram's envy ceases to be a mere affect. It becomes an embodied critique, an affective expression of a consciousness formed within the contradictions of caste and capitalism. His act of murder, then, is not a moral aberration but the terminal logic of a subjectivity produced under structural violence. This critique deepens when Balram adopts the name "Ashok Sharma" (Adiga, 2008, p. 302) in Bangalore, symbolically inheriting the caste privilege once wielded by his former master. As Mari Ruti argues, "social privilege" (2018, p. ix) is not only material but symbolic—a currency encoded in class, gender, and affiliations. By adopting an upper-caste surname, Balram taps into what Shalu Nigam calls the "invisible authority" embedded in the symbolic economy of caste identity (2016, p. 4), revealing how social mobility in neoliberal India remains tethered to inherited markers of caste legitimacy.

Anxiety

Put simply, anxiety is an emotional state marked by uneasiness and fear that emerges from "a realistic appraisal of one's situation of danger" (May, 1950, p. 227). This affective response can be accompanied by physiological correlates such as restlessness, behavioural changes, and paranoia, highlighting the complex body-mind connection in anxiety (Blanchard et al., 2008). Samir Chopra, in his book *Anxiety: A Philosophical Guide* (2024), offers a comprehensive definition of anxiety that encompasses its diverse interpretations across various fields of study:

> Different ages have characterized anxiety differently: as a spiritual crisis of faith, belief, and meaning; a cognitive-behavioral construct resulting from conditioned responses to man's physical and social environments; an animal instinct limited to creatures with a temporal sense who anticipate their own deaths; a response to material stress or society's sexual repressions; a medical affliction of faulty neurophysiology, a problem exclusively of our biology and physical architecture. (Chopra, 2024, p. 2)

Sianne Ngai, following Ernest Bosch's lead, calls anxiety as a type of "'expectation emotions'" (2005, p. 209) which is closely related to "the concept of futurity, and the temporal dynamics of deferral and anticipation in particular" (2005, p. 209–210). In other words, Ngai positions anxiety as an affect structured by temporal uncertainty, emerging from a state of

suspended anticipation in which the future remains unclear, and action is indefinitely deferred. Ngai's conception of anxiety is particularly relevant when we consider the widespread sense of insecurity and expectant feelings fostered by neoliberal structures. Notably, neoliberalism, with its emphasis on material acquisition and individualism, has fostered widespread "fear and anxiety" among common citizens (Anderson, 2015, p. 736). In this regard, Hall and O'Shea rightly observe: "The structural consequences of neoliberalism—the individualisation of everyone, the privatisation of public troubles and the requirement to make competitive choices at every turn—has been paralleled by an upsurge in feelings of insecurity, anxiety, stress and depression" (2013, p. 12). Moreover, in contemporary times, neoliberal subjects are trapped in a relentless cycle of self-improvement, where they are constantly pressured to enhance their competitiveness and optimize their choices in a futile attempt to alleviate the anxiety produced by the very system that demands such striving (Salecl 2010; Krce-Ivančić 2018). Within the Indian context, this anxiety is further exacerbated for historically marginalized communities who attempt to secure a position within the neoliberal marketplace, a domain predominantly controlled by the upper castes (Thorat & Newman 2007; Jodhka 2018). While neoliberalism purports to offer upward mobility through a "trickle-down" (emphasis our) logic, it, in practice, persistently debars lower-caste individuals from "the market-oriented political economy of neoliberal India" (Still, 2014, p. 1). This contradiction produces a sociopolitical landscape in which figures like Balram are ostensibly empowered to transcend caste hierarchies, yet remain structurally obstructed – resulting in social unrest often expressed through "extortion, bribery, and criminality" (Joseph, 2012, p. 72).

In the novel, the hit-and-run incident crystallizes how anxiety functions not merely as individual pathology but as a disciplinary affect that upholds caste hierarchies by instilling fear, submission, and self-surveillance. When Balram is coerced into falsely confessing to his employers' crime, his response exposes the psychological architecture of servitude:

> My life had been written away. I was to go to jail for a killing I had not done…I was trapped in the Rooster Coop… What kinds of strategies would I follow to escape the big, hairy, dirty men I would find in there? ...I remembered a story from Murder Weekly in which a man sent to jail pretended to have AIDS so that no one would bugger him. (Adiga, 2008, p. 177)

This moment exemplifies anxiety as both internal torment and political condition, demonstrating how structural violence operates through the production of specific emotional experiences. Balram's persistent dread of the imagined horrors of prison aligns with Ngai's

notion of anxiety as fundamentally rooted in "future-orientedness" (Ngai, 2005, p. 209). His fear is not grounded in an immediate reality but in a looming, uncertain future – of being violated, degraded, and erased – which underscores how anxiety emerges from the anticipation of threats that have not yet materialized but feel imminently possible. Even after learning that no one witnessed the accident, his dread does not recede because the affect has accomplished its disciplinary work, reinforcing his internalization of expendability and his employers' right to his life.

In addition to the "temporal dynamics" of anxiety, Ngai also develops the "spatial dimension" of anxiety, conceptualizing it as "something 'projected' onto others in the sense of an outward propulsion or displacement—that is, as a quality or feeling the subject refuses to recognize in himself and attempts to locate in another person or thing" (2005, p. 210). In other words, spatial anxiety manifests through a projective mechanism, whereby the affect is not solely internal but also externalized, as anxious individuals attribute the locus of their anxiety to an external entity. Ngai illustrates this through Freud's theories on anxiety, where projection functions as a defensive mechanism, allowing a neurotic individual to cast his anxiety onto an external object or person. In his book *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, Freud classified anxiety into two categories: "neurotic and realistic anxiety"[9] (1926, p. xii). In the novel, Balram's neurotic anxiety about sexual repression and realistic anxiety about an insecure future manifest through his displacement of internal tensions onto external objects and persons – his fetishist fixation on the "golden-haired woman" (Adiga, 2008, p. 218), his affective projection onto Dharam, his escalating fear of socioeconomic displacement amid Ashok's emotional withdrawal, and his paranoid imaginings of state surveillance.

In the novel, Adiga captures Balram's sexual desires through some evocative moments, such as his arousal at seeing Pinky Madam's breasts, overhearing an intimate moment between Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam, and witnessing Ashok's sexual encounter with a golden-haired woman. The sexual dimensions of Balram's anxiety prove particularly revealing of neoliberalism's psychic operations, functioning as what Freud would identify as neurotic anxiety manifesting through libidinal displacement. Balram's obsession with the golden-haired woman represents more than frustrated desire – it constitutes a neurotic symptom in the Freudian sense, where he tries to make his penurious past "itself non-existent" (1926, p. 34) through a sexualized fantasy. For Freud, neurotic anxiety does not stem from the intensity of sexual excitation itself but from its misdirection – when libidinal charge bypasses symbolic processing and is somatically rerouted into primitive neural circuits, leading to what he termed an "abnormal employment of that excitation" (Freud, 1962, p. 108). Balram's fetishization thus

serves as a defensive formation that enables him to displace his caste and class anxieties onto a sexualized object, allowing him to experience longing while avoiding both the trauma of social exclusion and the painful memory of his impecunious past. Additionally, this obsession with the golden-haired woman embodies what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism," wherein one remains attached to "a significantly problematic object" (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). For Berlant, "cruel optimism" arises when "the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility [but] actually makes it impossible to attain" (2011, p. 2). Hence, Balram's obsessive pursuit of a golden-haired prostitute, his exorbitant spending for this, and his ultimate disillusionment upon discovering her artificial hair epitomize how his neurotic symptom becomes the very vehicle for cruel optimism.

In *The White Tiger*, anxiety emerges not merely as an internal emotional condition but as what Gregory J Seigworth and Melissa Gregg describe as "forces of encounter" (2010, p. 2) – affective intensities that materialize in moments of proximity, particularly through Balram's fraught relationship with his nephew Dharam. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's affect theory, we can see that Balram's anxiety does not remain contained within his own psyche but spills outward, attaching itself to Dharam, who becomes what Ahmed calls an "object of feeling" (Ahmed, 2014, p. 13). This attachment is not rooted in Dharam's intrinsic character but in how Balram uses him to absorb and contain the pressures of guilt, fear, and moral ambiguity. Balram's confession— "I kept my hand on Dharam's head the whole time—he must have thought it was out of affection, but it was only to stop my hand from trembling" (Adiga, 2008, p. 258)— reveals Dharam as a kind of affective buffer: a human medium through which Balram stabilizes his trembling conscience.[10] As Ahmed notes, emotions "do not reside in subjects or objects" but are "produced as effects of circulation," shaped through contact and orientation (p. 10). In this context, Dharam becomes the surface onto which Balram displaces his anxious affect – not a symbol of innocence or moral anchor, but a repository for unresolved emotional turmoil, propping up a tenuous fantasy of coherence within a narrative steeped in betrayal and self-justification.

Interestingly, Balram's symbolic transformation into the "White Tiger" (emphasis ours) is significantly catalysed by the shifting dynamics of his relationship with Mr Ashok following Pinky Madam's departure. Ashok's affected Westernized persona gradually dissipates, and the initial amiability and goodwill he displayed toward Balram diminish concurrently with the arrival of Uma – his old lover. This change intensifies Balram's awareness of his own disposability within the neoliberal order. When Mr Ashok casually considers hiring a new driver, Balram realizes his position is not only precarious but also interchangeable – a stark

reminder of how caste-coded labour is treated within the market logics of neoliberal India. This moment crystallizes his "realistic anxiety" – what Freud defines as "anxiety about a known danger" (1926, p. 79) – as Balram becomes acutely aware of the imminent threat of unemployment and the return to abject poverty. It is this ever-present fear of economic and social regression that ultimately drives him to murder Mr Ashok: a desperate assertion of agency in a system that persistently denies him subjectivity.

Notably, even after the murder, Balram's anxiety does not abate. His letters to the Premier are frequently interrupted by jarring, bureaucratic-sounding excerpts that mimic police reports or news bulletins:

> The missing man was employed as driver of a Honda City vehicle at the time of the alleged incident. In this regard a case, FIR No. 438/05, P. S. Dhaula Kuan, Delhi, has been registered. He is also believed to be in possession of a bag filled with a certain quantity of cash. (Adiga, 2008, 32)

These intrusive official fragments reveal Balram's ongoing paranoia and internalized fear of capture. They function as affective residues of his crime, disrupting the coherence of his narrative and exposing how state surveillance – real or imagined – continues to haunt him. His first-person account is thus not merely a confession but an attempt to manage, displace, and narrate his anxiety under the shadow of potential retribution. These moments illustrate how anxiety, in *The White Tiger*, transcends mere emotional disturbance to become an enduring, disciplinary force – shaping thought, behaviour, and even narrative form itself.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Balram's emotional trajectory – shaped by resentment, envy, and anxiety – underscores how neoliberal capitalism and caste oppression co-produce a deeply entrenched system of affective domination. By tracing Balram's journey through the lens of Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings", this analysis reveals how these emotions are not mere personal reactions but politicized responses to systemic disenfranchisement. Balram's journey in *The White Tiger* ultimately reveals that his proclaimed escape from the Rooster Coop is an insidious trap. Though he murders Mr Ashok in a moment framed as rebellion, the act secures not freedom but a new form of subjugation – one less visible but no less corrosive. His transformation into a neoliberal entrepreneur, while liberating him from the structures of caste, entangles him in a subtler cage: one built on anxiety, paranoia, internalized surveillance, and isolation. Haunted by the fear of being discovered, Balram's post-crime life is dominated by anxiety and paranoia

– affects defined not by explosive catharsis but by a "remarkable capacity for duration" (Ngai, 2005, p. 7) that reflect a suspended psychic state. Though Balram has long struggled to escape the role of an exploited servant, his transformation into a neoliberal entrepreneur offers only the illusion of freedom. As David Huebert aptly observes, techno-capitalism in Bangalore, while seemingly promising "power and freedom," in fact entraps individuals in "a new servitude." (2017, p. 36). This new servitude is epitomized by Balram's own admission of sleepless nights: "I stay up the whole night, Your Excellency... The entrepreneur's curse. He has to watch his business all the time" (Adiga, 2008, p. 7) revealing a paranoid fear of stagnation and collapse where entrepreneurial success demands not mental composure but relentless vigilance and anxiety. Moreover, Balram's embrace of neoliberalism's hyper-individualistic, competitive ethos plunges him into what Greg Sharzer terms "an ever-present state of social isolation" (2022, p. 12). Adiga poignantly illustrates this alienation: Balram's sole companions become the hollow commodities of global capitalism – the chandelier, the silver Macintosh laptop, the midget fan – replacing human connection and underscoring the dehumanizing core of the neoliberal economic paradigm. His entrepreneurial subjectivity is sustained by a constant dread of failure, exposure, and emotional emptiness, which replaces the physical discipline of servitude with a psychological regime of self-monitoring and insecurity. In this sense, Adiga's critique is clear: the Rooster Coop is not dismantled by Balram's act of violence but merely transposed inward.

Endnotes:

[1] By the term "affective entrapment", we mean a condition in which the emotional life of the oppressed is manipulated to sustain the very systems that exploit them. In *The White Tiger*, Balram's emotional life – suffused with resentment, envy, and anxiety – becomes a tool of his own subjugation, illustrating how the Rooster Coop traps individuals not just physically but through internalized affects.

[2] In the context of caste, Cháirez-Garza defines "self-racialization" as the process by which Dalits, under the threat of social or physical violence, adopt visible bodily markers or behavioural cues that signal their untouchable status. This adaptation enables dominant caste groups to spatially identify and segregate them. The practice is thus both imposed and internalized, allowing caste hierarchies to be continually reproduced through space. See Cháirez-Garza, "Moving Untouched: B. R. Ambedkar and the Racialization of Untouchability." (2021, p. 230).

[3] *Slave morality*, as defined by Nietzsche (1989, pp. 24–56), arises from the resentment of the weak toward the powerful. Lacking the means for direct retaliation, the oppressed internalize their suffering and invert the values of their oppressors – elevating humility, meekness, and guilt as virtues while condemning strength and vitality as evil. Nietzsche condemns this moral system as reactive, life-denying, and fundamentally rooted in *ressentiment*, in contrast to the affirmative, self-legislating ethos of *master morality*.

[4] The *Halwai* caste, traditionally associated with sweet-making, belongs to the *Vaishya* varna in Hinduism, which includes traders and artisans. They occupy a relatively low position within the caste hierarchy and face systemic inequality and subordination by higher castes like *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas*. For details, see GS Ghurye's *Caste and Class in India* (1957, p. 8).

[5] Yashpal Jogdand argues that dominant castes construct an internalized "mental image" of Dalits based on established caste stereotypes. See Yashpal Jogdand's "Ground Down and Locked in a Paperweight: Toward a Critical Psychology of Caste-Based Humiliation." (2023, p. 44–45).
[6] See Jogdand "Ground Down and Locked in a Paperweight." (2023, p. 44–47).
[7] The Latin term *Homo economicus* refers to individuals governed by self-interest, rationality, and competition in the market-driven societies. For details, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. (2018, p. 228).
[8] Adorno's notion of *damaged life* refers to a condition in which individuals, deformed by structural violence and social domination, can no longer lead an uncoerced or authentic existence. Balram's act of murder thus emerges not as deviance but as the tragic endpoint of a life misshaped by entrenched injustice. For details, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. EFN Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005).
[9] For Freud, realistic anxiety refers to the response to external threats when the psyche feels unable to cope with the danger appropriately, while neurotic anxiety arises from unconscious conflicts, often related to repressed sexual or aggressive impulses. For details, see Sigmund Freud's *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1989).
[10] Affective buffer refers to a figure who absorbs or deflects the emotional weight of trauma, anxiety, or guilt that another subject cannot confront directly. In the novel, Dharam becomes such a buffer for Balram, allowing him to project moral uncertainty and inner conflict outward onto an emotionally proximate but psychologically pliable other – thereby shielding himself from the full psychic impact of his impending transgression.

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