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Neoliberal *Bildung* in Arvind Adiga's "*The White Tiger*"

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**Abstract**

In 1991, the Indian economy underwent an extensive liberalization, with changes like greater deregulation, privatization, and dismantling of welfare-state social provisions becoming prominent. Neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies founded on the idea that markets are the best way of distributing goods and services across the economy. It also denotes an overarching economic or cultural structure, or particular attitudes of inclinations towards entrepreneurship, competition, responsibility, and self-improvement. Neoliberalism has not only produced neoliberal subjects, it has impacted arts, media and other cultural products. Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* traces the growing up of a neoliberal subject in a neoliberal milieu where the neoliberal ethic of profiteering motivates and shapes the protagonist's psychological, moral and social education and development.

**Keywords:** Bildungsroman, Neoliberalism, Social Mobility, Self-Help

In his survey of the European *Bildungsroman* *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, Franco Moretti postulates four phases in the historical development of the *Bildungsroman* which has parallels with the historical phases of a country's national development. Moretti finds a correspondence between the historical moment of a nation and individual personal development and social expectations. When the *Bildungsroman* first appeared in Germany in the early eighteenth century, Germany was in pre-industrial phase, in which there was no conflict between individual and society. The second phase, which Moretti calls Stendhal's "Restoration *Bildungsroman*" shows for the first time conflict between individuation and socialization. Moretti's third phase is that of Balzac and his capitalistic world, where social integration and material success dominate concerns over individual autonomy, values and ethics. The English *Bildungsroman* like Tom Jones, David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, and Great Expectations constitute Moretti's fourth phase which rules out any opposition

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between individual aspirations and social demands.

Moretti's third phase of the *Bildungsroman* is characterized by a realism which entails "the impossibility of breaking loose from prevailing normative codes (96). Moretti holds that Balzac's novels which debunk notions of individual autonomy and celebrate social mobility and material success constitute the third phase in the development of the *Bildungsroman*. In Balzac's capitalist world, social mobility, monetary pursuit and careerism become the sole goal of the protagonist, and concerns for morality, ethics and individual autonomy take a back seat. Balzac's novels chart the careers and fortunes of such young and enterprising protagonists like Rubempré, Eugène de Rastignac and Félix de Vandenesse who achieve their success and ambition through corruption and compromise.

The *Bildungsroman* novels written after the 1991 economic reforms in India are similar in characteristics and features to that of Moretti's aforementioned third phase. In the beginning of the 1990s the Indian economy saw extensive neoliberal economic reforms, commonly referred to as LPG model or Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation model. The main objective of this model of economic reforms was to attain rapid economic growth and to utilise the nation's resources and potential to the fullest extent to match

up with economies of the developed countries. In the neoliberal LPG model, liberalisation signified the loosening of government control and regulations. Privatisation implied the increased participation of private entities in business, delivery of services and transfer of ownership from the public sector to the private sector through disinvestment. Globalisation signified the opening up of the economy to foreign players, foreign direct investment and greater contact with the various economies of the world. As a result there was increasing deregulation, privatization, and influx of foreign players in the economy and abandonment of welfare-state measures in the country. These steps also were taken for making the economy more competitive, market-driven and growth-oriented. The neoliberal LPG model took concrete form in the reduction of import tariffs, deregulation of markets, disinvestment, reduction of taxes, and greater foreign investment. The neoliberal economic policy has had both positive and negative impact. The neoliberal reforms have been credited for the high economic growth, higher per capital income, increased Foreign Direct Investment, and modernization of the economy. On the other hand, it has also been blamed for increased competition, increased rich-poor divide and regional disparity. Despite these criticisms and negative impacts, neoliberalism has been the dominant paradigm of the Indian political and

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economic scenario irrespective of the ruling party after 1991 till date.

The term has become a significant theoretical concept in the field of sociology, political science and economics to discuss the social, political and economic developments of our times. It is, however, a relatively new term in the realm of literary and cultural studies. Nevertheless, it is a powerful concept for analysis and interpretation of the literature and cultural products of the post-globalization era. Especially in the study of postcolonial literature, neoliberalism is especially instrumental in exploring the working neocolonialism of the Third World as the first and foremost route through which neoliberalism imposes a new colonial-like control is through economic liberalization.

Neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies founded on the idea that markets are the best way of distributing goods and services across the economy. It is a political and economic philosophy which embodies the forces of liberalization and globalization of the free market economy. This ideology has not remained restricted to the world of economics and commerce. This ideology has permeated each and every realm of our contemporary life and reality. The term has now expanded its scope and connotes cultural structures, and specific attitudes towards entrepreneurship, a strong belief in competition, and self-improvement. It has

impacted social relations, patterns of thought, and cultural production. It is so pervasive that, it is taken as a natural way of life and seldom recognised as an ideology. It views social relations in terms of entrepreneurship, competition, self-interest and profiteering. The neoliberal worldview and attitude is internalised by citizens of neoliberal regimes, thereby not only impacting the polity and economy of a nation, but also the evolution and configuration of individual subjectivity and sensitivity. Neoliberalism today has become so pervasive, it is taken as a natural and accepted way of life and seldom recognised as a set of economic policies.

The recent years have seen an emerging trend among writers appropriating the generic conventions of the *Bildungsroman* to portray the impact of neoliberalism on selfhood, subjectivity and national culture. Novels like Elliot Perlman's *Three Dollars* (1988), HweeHwee Tan's *Mammon Inc.* (2001), Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* (2005), Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Peter Mountford's *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism* (2011) and Hamid Mohsin's *How to be Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) present a neoliberal protagonist striving for survival in the neoliberal world of competition, exploitation, inequality, and regional disparity. These novels chart the coming of age of the protagonist in the backdrop of neoliberal realities of

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globalized nations which undergo a sea change undergoing rapid changes under the forces of neoliberalism and economic globalization.

Neoliberal subjects are entrepreneurial subjects who constantly enterprise to raise their status, strive to make themselves rich and ascend the social hierarchy. Under the neoliberal framework, poverty and unemployment is not caused due social exploitation, lack of resources and deprivation but due to sloth and lack of entrepreneurship and competitive spirit. Neoliberal subjectivity propels the transformation of the self for accumulation of wealth by exploitation of natural and human resources and by enterprising in the market economy, growing up and amass wealth in a neoliberal society. In each of these novels, the ethic of capitalism motivates and shapes the education, development and social mobility of the protagonist; the protagonist adapts habits and traits necessary for success in the neoliberal world resulting in the development of a self-obsessed, self-interested, and grotesque self.

In the novel *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, the Pakistani-born writer Hamid Mohsin, in the guise of a self-help guide, presents the protagonist's beginnings as a poor boy and his quest for wealth and love as he moves to the city and enters the bottled water business. In Peter Mountford's *A Young Man's Guide to Late*

*Capitalism*, the 27-year-old protagonist Gabriel Francisco de Boya, a former financial reporter and newly hired equities analyst of a rapacious hedge fund embarks on his first assignment to Bolivia to secretly obtain information that will give it a competitive edge in its investment choices. Mountford's protagonist attempts to generate profit from the country's political transformation even at the risk of manipulating, betraying and exploiting his mother and lover.

The Singaporean writer Hwee Hwee Tan in her novel *Mammon Inc.* presents a protagonist who realizes that personal fulfilment and self-improvement is possible only by internalizing the neoliberal spirit. Tan explores neoliberal subject formation after Singapore's socio-economic restructuring after the 1997 Asian financial crisis as her protagonist Chiah Deng struggles to straddle the gap between East and West, chopsticks and credit cards in order to land a position in the largest multinational company in the world *Mammon Inc.*

*The White Tiger*, the debut novel of Arvind Adiga, charts the diabolical journey of its protagonist BalramHalwai's through the poverty, corruption and caste system of modern India. Adiga's highly ambitious neoliberal protagonist murders his master in order to get the capital to start a taxi company in India's hi-tech hub Bangalore

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and gets out of the bog of perpetual poverty and social marginalisation.

Ever since modern societies have acknowledged the self-actualization needs of the individual, the *Bildungsroman* has emerged to resolve the conflict between this individual desire for self-determination and the coercive demands of socialization. The tendency towards individuality and autonomy is bound to conflict with the opposing tendency of normality and social order. The normative ideal and the social order therefore should not only appear as legal and universal, but also legitimate and acceptable. Modern society cannot suppress individual impulses against normality and social order and replaces the free individual with a fearful subject. Modern society needs convinced citizens who perceive and accept the normative ideals and social norms as legitimate, reasonable and justified. The individual who absorbs and internalizes them to such an extent that intrinsic impulses are amalgamated with extrinsic compulsions and rendered indistinguishable. The *Bildungsroman* has achieved this amalgamation through the portrayal of the transition of youth to maturity better than any other cultural form.

Literary history has shown that the *Bildungsroman*, a genre which is about youth transitioning into adulthood is a genre most conducive for reflecting a changing society. A society which is undergoing a paradigm shift can best be

reflected in a genre whose hero is coming of age rather than being a mature adult. The eighteenth century German *Bildungsroman* reflected the emergence of bourgeois society and the nineteenth century European *Bildungsroman* reflected the advent of modernity. The *Bildungsroman* in the twenty first century in India is performing a similar function and representing the neoliberal culture which characterises the nation after 1991. Adiga and Swarup choose the *Bildungsroman* to write their stories about India as the genre to reflect the scope of social mobility promised by neoliberalism. The *Bildungsroman* is about youth, and it is youth which embodies the restlessness, enterprise and mobility which is characteristic of the neoliberal ethic. If the traditional *Bildungsroman* was a presentation of an individual's integration in a capitalistic society, the Neoliberal *Bildungsroman* is a presentation of an individual's integration in neoliberal society. Critics have been bewildered by the amazing resilience of the *Bildungsroman* genre and its survival even in the modern era. It is a genre which resurfaces when a nation makes a paradigm shift. India is making a paradigm shift from a socialist society to a neoliberal society after the implementation of the 1991 economic reforms. The neoliberal *Bildungsroman* is a symbolic representation of the formation of the individual and national identity of India

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as it makes a transition from a socialist to a neoliberal paradigm.

The present paper analyses an important phase in the development of the *Bildungsroman* in India, the genre's neoliberal incarnation after the emergence of neoliberal economy in India after 1991 economic reforms. It analyses Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as neoliberal *Bildungsroman* novels which changes the notion of maturity in neoliberal India through a conflation of maturation of their protagonists with entrepreneurs and neoliberal consumers. The protagonist of *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai begins his journey as a chauffeur and ends as a successful businessman. Ram Mohammad Thomas begins his life in the slums of Dharavi and ends up as a billionaire at the end of the novel. The *Bildung* for these two protagonists does not entail a reconciliation of conflict between their distinct individualism with social, but acquiring, capital, knowledge and skills for monetary and material success.

*The White Tiger* is a *Bildungsroman* in the epistolary form which consists of seven long emails written over seven nights in which Balram Halwai, a self-proclaimed and "self-made entrepreneur" is now the proprietor of The White Tiger Taxi Service in India's technological capital Bangalore, narrates his entrepreneurial life in

neoliberal India to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who was on a visit to Bangalore, India's outsourcing capital, to learn the secrets of Indian entrepreneurship. Balram asserts that the Chinese leader "will know everything there is to know about how entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of man" (4). Balram's entrepreneurship and his single-minded and determined ambition for material success uplifts him from his penury in rural India and places him amidst affluence and wealth in India's IT capital, Bangalore.

Balram's rags to riches story begins in the village of Laxmangarh where he was born to a rickshaw puller father. In Laxmangarh, Balram's family suffers exploitation at the hands of the village landlords. The novel's name and his company's name which Balram sets up later in Bangalore is derived from a remark of a school inspector, who impressed by Balram's intelligence and talent, nicknames him "the White Tiger." Like the white tiger, which is very rare in the wilderness, Balram's intelligence and talent is hard to find among the poor and downtrodden in Laxmangarh. Inspired by his nickname, Balram transforms into a cunning, ambitious and ruthless character participating in the cut-throat competition in a neoliberal society to accumulate wealth by any means possible.

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Balram like Anand's Munoo has to quit his school to earn to support his family. In a *Bildungsroman*, the agent of Bildung is the world and not the institutions of formal education. The hero of a *Bildungsroman* is educated by the world Balram tries to learn whatever he came across. Balram knew that only man of the world knew the way of the world. Balram, " a big believer in education—especially [his ]own" (43)makes maximum utilisation of his learning opportunities. Realizing that sincerity is unrewarded, Balram neglects his work in the tea shop in order to eavesdrop on the conversations of his customers. Balram considers himself a "half-baked" and "half-cooked" Indian who got his "real education" from "the road and the pavement" (259).

Hearing from one of his customers at the teashop about the high wage and comfortable life of chauffeurs, Balram learns to drive and is hired by Ashok, son of one of the landlords of Laxmangarh. Balram who considered himself a bad servant and a good listener, becomes familiar with the art of corruption and bribery from his master Ashok who bribed ministers and officials to evade income tax and conceal his fraudulent business of selling coal out of government mines. Balram stops sending money back to his family and schemes to get another driver Ram Prasad dismissed in order to go Delhi. In Delhi, Balram witnesses first-hand the

widespread prevalence and persistence extensive corruption in the government. The juxtaposition of the poor and the wealthy in Delhi made Balram feel the social divide which was not evident in his village Laxmangarh. Balram is pressurised to confess to a homicide committed by his master Ashok's wife Pinky Madam who hits a child on the road while driving drunk.

Ashok's kindness of no consequence to the ambitious Balram who realizes that serving Ashok will not bring any betterment in his life and will not help him escape what he calls "the Rooster Coop," an apparatus of oppression which traps India's poor like himself. Balram finds that murdering his master Ashok and escaping with his bag of money is the only way to escape "the Rooster Coop." Despite the possibility that Ashok's family will murder all his family members and relatives in Laxmangarh, Balram proceeds with his plan and murders Ashok with a broken liquor bottle, escapes with his money bag containing seven lakhs rupees and moves to Bangalore, outsourcing capital of the world, where he sets up a taxi company called White Tiger Drivers that transports Bangalore's call centre workers at night safely to their homes. Apropos his nickname bestowed at school and like the predatory beast in the wilderness who hunts its prey with stealth and calculated movements, Balram executes his plan with perfectly. With the murder of Ashok, the

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transformation of Balram into a neoliberal beast is complete.

BalramHalwai's choice of Bangalore to start his business is significant from the neoliberal perspective. Bangalore is the city which reflects the India's economic reforms of 1991 to the maximum. The city transformed during India's neoliberal era with the establishment of multi-national manufacturing and service-sector enterprises. The city has emerged as "hub" of Information Technology (IT) and business services. Bangalore is considered a model for how other Indian cities should grow in the information era, in which new and upcoming entrepreneurs drive India's economic development. Balram, like a seasoned capitalist, moves to Bangalore which facilitates businesses with Special Economic Zones (SEZ) and liberal economic laws. Balram's story is not only about his life but also about India's adoption of neoliberal policy in 1991 through which the country aims to turn into a global economic superpower.

Balram's taxi company White Tiger Drivers becomes a great entrepreneurial success. Balram is now a wealthy and successful entrepreneur and has completed his rags to riches journey from "India of darkness" to "India of light." Balram applies all the methods of corruption and manipulation learnt during his "apprenticeship" to his master Ashok to keep his taxi company run smoothly. Like

Ashok, Balram buys a family whose son was hit and killed by one of his taxi drivers. Balram who has never tried to reach out to his ancestral village is almost sure that they must have been certainly killed by Ashok's family as revenge. Though fearful of the discovery of his crime, Balram does not regret his actions which has enabled him to live as a free man rather than as a servant. For Balram, his freedom is worth the lives of his family and his former master Ashok.

Arvind Adiga has created in BalramHalwai an unparalleled specimen of the "homo *œconomicus*" or the economic man, which is a view of human beings as agents who are rational, self-interested and pursue their goals optimally. The *homo œconomicus* in a neoliberal economy "allocates scarce means in order to make concrete choices between different outcomes or ends" (Downing 51). In the words of Michel Foucault, *homo œconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself. This is true to the extent that, in practice, the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo œconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo œconomicus* entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings (Foucault, 226). Foucault posits that the neoliberal economy views all human beings as *homo œconomicus* and analyses all forms of



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human life through principles of market economy.

Balram takes neoliberal ratiocination to an extreme becoming a *homo aeconomicus* sociopath. According to Wolman, sociopathy is the willingness "to lie, cheat, take advantage, [and] exploit" (42). The technical term used by *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by American Psychiatric Association for sociopathy is Antisocial Personality Disorder which is diagnosed on the basis any three of the following seven characteristics: (1) "failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest; (2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning for personal profit or pleasure; (3) impulsivity of failure to plan ahead; (4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults; (5) reckless disregard for safety of self or others; (6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain steady work or honor financial obligations; (7) lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated or stolen from another" (701-702).

Balram Halwai qualifies for most of the criteria which makes him a *homo economics* sociopath. He is willing to lie, cheat, steal, neglect his work and even murder for his material welfare. Balram

adopts deceitful ways for his personal profit. He betrays Ram Persad, a fellow driver in the household where he works and gets him dismissed by revealing that he is a Muslim in disguise. He has no regard for the safety of his family in Laxmangarh who would be killed in revenge if Balram precedes with his plan to murder his master, Ashok and steal his money for his dream his material advancement. He runs his taxi company under the alias Ashok Sharma, his master whom he had murdered. He bribes the officials when one of his taxi drivers kills a person in an accident. Balram has no remorse for his actions and rather justifies his acts, on the ground that they helped to come out of "India of darkness" and break the "Rooster coop."

The conflict between the values of the hero and the values of society is the fulcrum of the classical *Bildungsroman*. The Bildung of the hero of the classical *Bildungsroman* constitutes the reconciliation of the values of society with individual aspirations, which facilitates the acceptance of the hero in society and ends his dissatisfaction. In the neoliberal incarnation of the *Bildungsroman*, this conflict is absent between the individual and his society. The only conflict is between the rich and the poor. The poor want to escape their poverty and the rich want to hold on to their affluence and want the poor to remain poor.

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The continuance of neoliberalism requires the formation of neoliberal subjects who imbibe the values, attitudes and ideology of neoliberalism and act according to its tenets. Balram fulfills the social role set by neoliberalism and contributes to neoliberalism's progress by setting up a taxi company which facilitates the call center business in Bangalore by transporting the workers of call centers safely back home. Balram Halwai's *Bildung* comes to an end when he is able to escape destitution and achieve economic success as a entrepreneur. As a true proponent of neoliberalism, Balram shares his entrepreneurial skills with the Chinese premier to keep the wheel of neoliberalism turning

Economic success is the driving force of a neoliberal society The economic success is demanding and expensive. Thus the novels present a state of affairs where bribery and corruption are paramount; indeed they are seen as the pre-condition for social success. Escaping the lot of endemic destitution and leaving behind the anonymous mass, which, according to Aravind Adiga's narrator in *The White Tiger* cannot even exercise the basic right to vote in the so-called "World's largest democracy", seems to demand a certain moral ambiguity, if not complete lack of scruples. But it is precisely this ethical

laxity that eases the way into a social status that rids the subject from conscripting burdens of the past, fundamentally poverty, but also other drawbacks such as low caste, remote birth-place, or the lack of minimal schooling, let alone tertiary education.

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