

Balram (Adiga's novel 'The White Tiger') Ambitious

Character As the first-person narrator of the story, Balram is not only the central character. He is the overwhelmingly dominant character, whose cynical, comic and honest voice is heard from the first to the last page. Balram is a wounded man, hurt by the degradation of poverty and, even more, by the humiliation of having to show deference to others who are higher caste, richer or otherwise superior in status. He is also very intelligent, largely because he absorbs information from others. 'I am not an original thinker,' he explains to the reader. 'I am an original listener.' He is given the nickname the 'white tiger' by a school inspector who says that he is rarest and most cunning animal in the 'jungle' that is India.

Born the son of a rickshaw driver, Balram gradually moves up the social and economic scale, first running a tea-shop, then becoming a driver and finally a wealthy businessman, or 'entrepreneur', as he likes to call himself. By a minor stroke of luck, he is hired as a driver for the son of the landlord who is exploiting his family. Working for the landlord's son, Balram observes the bribes he pays to government officials so that they will turn a blind eye to Ashok's family's illegal business affairs and tax avoidance. Later he kills the son, steals his money and sets himself up in business, providing a taxi service that ferries call-centre workers to and from their offices. In the end, he explains to the reader that he has no regrets about his life. Even though he killed a man, he had to in order to escape a life of poverty and servitude.

Activities Driving a car, cheating people (for example, using false receipts for car repairs to get extra money from his boss). Imitating the corrupt and soul-less life style of the entrepreneurs upon whom he models himself: drinking, gambling, whoring.

Illustrative moments

Ambitious After overhearing someone say that drivers earn a high salary from rich men, Balram, who at that point is running a tea-stall, commits himself to becoming a driver. He has no experience, no contacts, no idea of how to proceed, but he is single-minded in his pursuit of his goal. He instantly leaves his family-business of the tea-stall, finds money for driving lessons and tells lies in order to be hired as the chauffeur for a rich man's son.

Amoral Balram has no moral compass, only a burning desire to get rich and escape the personal degradation of being a servant. In many ways he is indebted to his boss, Ashok, the man whose car he drives. From Ashok, Balram learns the dirty tricks of being an entrepreneur, how to cheat, lie and steal. One day, he cuts Ashok's throat with a broken bottle and steals his money. Why did I kill him? Balram asks himself. Because, he says, he wanted to escape the humiliation of being a servant, of having to bow down to others.

Honest Toward the end of the novel, when Balram is a rich man, himself driven by a chauffeur, his car accidentally kills a young man on the street. No charge is made against him because he has bribed half the police force, but later Balram takes a large sum of money to the house of the dead man. When the parents of the dead man express confusion, Balram explains that he is responsible for the accident (because he told the driver to go as fast as possible) and that the police let him off because that 'is the way of the jungle we live in.' He forces the parents to accept the money and asks for their forgiveness. At the same time, he fears that his colleagues will sense that he is weak and will take advantage of him.

Analytical Balram makes many shrewd observation about Indian society and political system. He understands the hypocrisy of a country that sees itself as the legacy of Gandhi. 'It's a fucking joke,' Balram says when he drives past a billboard with an image of the ascetic Gandhi.