

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Theses and Dissertations

Hunter College

Fall 10-10-2022

The Structures of Intra-national Class Divisions in Neoliberalism: The women of “light” and “dark” in The White Tiger

Sneha Madimi
CUNY Hunter College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/946

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

The Structures of Intra-national Class Divisions in Neoliberalism:

The women of “light” and “dark” in *The White Tiger*

by

Sneha Madimi

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in English Literature, Language, and Theory, Hunter College

The City University of New York

2022

10/10/2022

Date

Dr. Sonali Perera

Thesis Sponsor

10/10/2022

Date

Dr. Tanya Agathocleous

Second Reader

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, represents gender hierarchies and the class struggle of India's neoliberal present. Adiga uses elements of satire and allegory to teach us something about how women are differently positioned in the neoliberal system. David Harvey in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (2). I will consider the novel, alongside Chandra Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" and Betty Joseph's "Neoliberalism and Allegory," in relation to the class divide and representation of rural and urban women in the neoliberal setting of *The White Tiger*. I argue that the intranational class divisions complicate and texture general (and hegemonic) formulas of "third world" women. Over the course of my thesis, I attempt to unpack the binary structures of light and dark, rural and urban, modern and backward through an investigation of the characters Kusum and Pinky Madam.

Chandra Mohanty's essay "Under Western Eyes" critiques Western feminists' understanding of so-called third world women. Mohanty claims that the third world women are an idealized, cultural figure created by Western feminists. Her essay bridges the gap between the idealized "Woman" as a cultural and ideological figure and "women," the real material subjects with true identities:

The relationship between "Woman"—a cultural and ideological composite Other constructed through diverse representational discourses (scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc)—and "women"—real, material subjects of their collective histories—is one of the central questions the practice of feminist scholarship seeks to address. This connection between women as historical subjects and the re-presentation of Woman produced by hegemonic discourses

is not a relation of direct identity, or a relation of correspondence or simple implication. It is an arbitrary relation set up by particular cultures. (3)

Western feminist writings of Mohanty's time failed to understand the third world woman and further widened the cultural divide through their assumptions and projections. Western feminism's understanding of third world women is based on economic development (for example, women's employment status, inheritance rights, income, wages, etc.). While economic independence and financial security are imperative parts of human progress, especially for women, Western feminists tend to ignore other factors. The assumptions of the Western feminists Mohanty is responding to are based on biases and stereotypes that the West has created about third world women. I utilize the polemical points of her essay to focus on the treatment of women in the neoliberal environment. I point out that Adiga fashions female characters to question the general notion of a third world woman. Throughout the novel, Adiga paints a textured picture of third world women that have different struggles from Western women in the neoliberal system. Moreover, their class differences within the same nation cause them to be isolated in their struggle, which in turn is an antithesis to the "sisterhood" claim of Western feminists.

Neoliberalism fetishizes and complicates the third world woman

Neoliberalism also operates in a similar way. It measures the development of human beings economically, mostly in terms of their production value as workers and income generators. In the novel, the identities of the women are based on how much monetary value they can bring and how much power they hold in society. Feminism is refracted through the tainted measurements of neoliberalism and capitalism. Moreover, neoliberalism does not offer opportunities for human growth and progress to the female characters, even economically. The value of a person is determined by her class and the hegemonic structures set in place. In *The*

White Tiger, women are categorized based on their economic position, and they become commodities in the neoliberal landscape. This follows the “India of Light” and “India of Darkness” ideology espoused by Balram, where women are presented as part of their economic environment. The women in the novel are allegories of the rural “India of Darkness” and the urban “India of Light” (Adiga 10).

One of the examples of commodification in the text is fetishization. Fetishization in the novel goes beyond the sexual connotation; it has layers of objectification and idealization. By fetishization, I mean that the women are represented to be sexual and commercial commodities in the neoliberal system. A woman is objectified or idealized based on her class in the novel. Additionally, certain women of a higher class are idolized or associated with the attributes of supernatural beings (such as a goddess). Joseph discusses the function of allegory in the neoliberal framework: “Allegory appropriates the fetishism of commodities for itself, for in the metamorphosis of things actually coming to life and speaking” (90). For example, the trafficked women in the novel are silenced and their bodies forced into sex slavery. These women are commodified and exploited, but their presence in the novel reflects neoliberalism’s degeneration. Their presence blows the cover of the neoliberal, urban, progressive “India of Light.”

Pinky Madam, belonging to the upper class, is also a victim of commodification when Balram views her as a goddess. He idolizes her for being an upper-class woman and she exemplifies what is considered “progressive” in the neoliberal framework. Balram’s attitude towards Pinky Madam exposes an unrealistic devotion towards capitalism and the upper class. And devotion explicates the suppression of the lower classes by their masters on a subconscious level. Through the vision of Balram, Adiga exposes the unrealistic cultural representation of urban women compared to rural women. Pinky Madam becomes dehumanized as she is viewed

as a goddess, superior to others because of her class. The goddess fetishization appropriates age-old mythology in the service of the new capitalist system of India.

Summary of *The White Tiger*

The White Tiger is set in contemporary India and written in an epistolary form to Wen Jiabo, Premier of China, by our protagonist Balram. Balram writes a series of confessional letters to share his “rags-to-riches” story. He uses a satirical and a sarcastic tone, narrating the story of killing of his boss, Ashok, and starting his entrepreneurial venture. He continues to differentiate between rural India, the “India of Darkness,” and the urban part, the “India of Light.” Adiga uses the voice of Balram, who is somewhat of a subaltern figure in the novel, to expose, critique, and question the idea of the “India of Light.” Balram starts off with a narrative of his humble origins in a small village called Laxmangarh. He points out the lack of infrastructure in the village (such as malnourished children, no electricity, and no clean water) due to the Indian government. He is labeled as “half-baked” because people like him were “never allowed to complete [their] schooling” (8). The feudal practices continue in the village where landlords dominate the lower classes. Additionally, he points to the corruption of his money-hungry grandma, Kusum, as the cause of his downfall. He resents Kusum because she might have been involved in the death of his mother. He goes on to describe his life employed as a driver by Mr. Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam.

Balram’s confessional story exposes the class divisions in a neoliberal state. Growing up in a rural place, Balram had limited opportunities for education and lacked access to healthcare. The lower classes in the rural areas are subdued through ignorance and lack of awareness; in the urban areas, the rich dominate the poor classes through money and power. A classic example of that would be when Pinky Madam was able to get away with a drunk-and-driving case and Balram was to be used as a scapegoat: rich families’ interests are negotiated

and considered by politicians of the town. Balram's story shows the advantages that the rich take of the poor. The novel is aligned with David Harvey's comment on the power of the economic elites in the neoliberal system. In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* mentions the function of neoliberalism is to "re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and...restores the power of economic elites" (Harvey 19). The female characters, Kusum and Pinky Madam represent a divide in class, income, and urbanization. They symbolize the social inequality that characterizes neoliberal India.

The commodification of female characters in neoliberal India

Due to the divide in class, income, and urbanization, the female characters are commodified and isolated from each other. Neoliberalism complicates the relationship among women because there is a lack of unity or "sisterhood." Categories like third world women cannot account for class, as that would be an oversimplification of the political and economic structure. It would overgeneralize the different oppressions that women go through because of their social position. They do not share a common struggle or oppression, and there is a lack of female collaboration to question the neo-capitalist system. In contrast, women are pitted against one another and do not share common empathy for each other, even if one belongs to the same class structure (an example would be Kusum and Balram's mother). While in "Under Western Eyes" Chandra Mohanty criticizes Western feminism's view of the third world women, Adiga represents and criticizes the isolating structure of neoliberalism through his depictions of Kusum and Pinky Madam.

Balram continues to see his female employer, Pinky Madam, as a goddess: "Now another face appears, to the side of his, in memory's mirror. Pinky Madam—his wife. Every bit as good-looking as her husband; just as the image of the goddess in the Birla Hindu Temple in New Delhi is as fair as the god to whom she is married" (38). Pinky Madam, hailing from a

higher class than everyone else, is compared to a goddess. This masks the idea of her being treated as a commodity and a neoliberal fetish object. On the other hand, Kusum, Balram's grandmother, is a rural woman residing on the fringes of neoliberal India. Balram describes her as a "dictator," "sly," "old," and "cunning." The image of this woman rubbing her forearms when she completed an evil deed connotes satisfaction after propagating her evil plans to get what she wants in the end. Kusum's and Pinky Madam's depiction here aligns with the "old conflicts between the town mouse and the country mouse." If Balram is the mouthpiece of neoliberalism, then he shows the proponents of neoliberalism that rural village inhabitants are wicked, backward, and maybe even evil. Kusum's oppression is a bit different from Pinky Madam's. Balram uses Kusum to promote neoliberalism's propaganda against rural and lower-class women. They are cheap, evil-minded women who look out for their own interests. If Balram's narrative about Pinky Madam is compared with Kusum's, one can see that Pinky Madam has similar characteristics. However, neoliberalism does not provide basic human rights for rural women, such as access to clean water, food, bathrooms, education, etc. It is the irony of the neoliberal system that the state does not provide the means for human well-being, especially for women, but it will berate those of the lower classes (since neoliberalism keeps the position of economic elites intact).

Adiga shows how women are othered in the neoliberal system through certain economic barriers and categories. They are isolated, divided by class, and lack collective organization. Neoliberalism's ruling elites seek to weaken the power of unions and collective bargaining to remove barriers to capitalism. There is no contestation of global capital, individualism, and the neoliberal structure. They do not have agency over their own identities. Adiga depicts the lack of agency neoliberalism gives to women by displaying the different nuances of oppression in the lives of the trafficked women, Pinky Madam and Kusum. The novel significantly critiques the ideology of third world women having a universal type of oppression. Adiga's novel is a

testament to Mohanty's argument about third world women's lives being more nuanced than the monolithic perceptions of Western feminism and neoliberalism.

Formulas for third world women don't apply to Kusum and Pinky Madam

Kusum and Pinky Madam represent the way rural India and urban India interact with each other. The two economic spaces of India are isolated from each other, not only economically but culturally. They have different levels of access to resources and perceive each other negatively. Mohanty's essay criticizes the third world sisterhood notion of women which proposes that all third world women are victims and assumes that their experiences are the same. As she puts it,

in any given piece of feminist analysis, women are characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression. What binds women together is a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression. It is at this point that an elision takes place between 'women' as a discursively constructed group and 'women' as material subject of their own history. (56)

Mohanty responds to Western feminists making assumptions about shared oppression and all third world women having some sort of "sisterhood." Global experiences of women are different because of different economic spaces within the same country, such as rural and urban. Pinky Madam belongs to a transnational ruling class, whereas Kusum belongs to the rural poor, even as she exploits those below her.

I extend her argument to consider how the experiences of women are different within the same country. An observable pattern is the lack of sisterhood in *The White Tiger* because Kusum and Pinky Madam do not share the same oppression. Sisterhood and the third world do not account for class and access to resources. The women in urban and rural India are isolated from each other's experiences in many ways and have a tense relationship. These two Indias

strive against each other yet are dependent on each other. Both Indias look down on each other. The urban looks down on the rural for its poverty and lack of economic development and progress in social rights or literacy. The rural looks down on the urban for its vanity, lack of morals, and for following Western ideals. Pinky Madam (“India of light,” urban) exemplifies the India that boasts of its globalization. Kusum represents the “India of darkness” where the rural reside on the margins of society, remote and cut off from the hyper-capitalist and globalized urbanites.

Adiga wittily represents Kusum utilizing the evil old woman trope to highlight the hypocrisy of neoliberalism. Collective societal evils such as dowry, the landlord system, and child marriage are exacerbated in rural areas due to the rise of neoliberalism. The degenerate Kusum character represents the Indian rural environment: “Electricity poles—defunct. Water tap—broken. Children—too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India. Yes, a typical Indian village paradise, Mr. Jiabao. One day I’ll have to come to China and see if your village paradises are any better” (13). Kusum acts as the neoliberal adversary in the novel because she exemplifies the idea of rural India as other: old-fashioned and declining in value. Rural areas are neglected in terms of education, women’s welfare, medical facilities, and other opportunities for growth as compared to urban areas. Adiga’s usage of satire helps to illuminate the narrative that is being given to the poor and the marginalized. Adiga shows Kusum and other villagers as victims of neoliberalism, which disrupts the lives of rural people by causing obstructions in their social, economic, and communal village life.

The neoliberal narrative of women in the “India of Darkness”: Kusum

The neoliberalism narrative in the novel shows the women of “darkness” to be cunning, vile, and money-hungry. It ignores the oppression and internalized misogyny inculcated in

Kusum's mind. Kusum and many other rural/poor/slum women of India are perceived as villainous because of the dominant neoliberal narrative ventriloquized by Balram. The urban-rural divide and/or rich-poor divide map onto an idea of the urban being equated with prosperity, education, and exclusivity.

Pinky Madam and Kusum interact with an India which has been split apart by neoliberalism. Kusum fits a typical fairy tale trope of the evil old woman, except that she is the villain in twenty-first-century neoliberal India. She uses age-old tactics to get what she wants—manipulation and blackmail. Balram describes her as a “dictator,” “sly,” “old,” and “cunning.” Her traditional practices such as child marriages, dowry, and exploitation, are what the India of “darkness” stands for. Kusum cannot conceive of a sisterhood even amongst the village women who have similar experiences. And women use the traditional practices of child marriage and dowry to subjugate other women. These are adapted in the context of neoliberalism's profit-maximizing frameworks. Dowry and child marriages are used to extort economic gain out of women: “And then there was the dowry that Kusum would screw out of the girl's family. All that twenty-four-karat gold, all that cash fresh from the bank. At least some of it I'd keep for myself. All these were sound arguments in favor of marriage” (267-268).

Kusum is the walking symbol of degeneration of what used to be the pride of India since ancient times: the village and its communal lifestyle. Neoliberal ideology must devalue village life as backward and vile. In fact, Kusum participates in neoliberalism undergirded by feudal characteristics. Her basic agenda is to generate money. She masks her greed by invoking family traditions and family values. She continues to use language that shows her actions and intentions are for the greater good of the family. In a letter she writes, “So I do not order you to marry. But I tempt you with the joys of married life. It is good for the community. Every time there is a marriage there is more rain in the village. The water buffalo will get fatter. It will give more milk. These are known facts. We are all so proud of you, being in the city. But you must stop

thinking only about yourself and think about us too” (113). Kusum continues to tempt her sons and grandsons to get married because of the common Indian practice of retrieving dowry from the bride’s family. Kusum’s practices evoke the commodification of family in the modern village. She participates in oppressive and old-fashioned practices to generate wealth through any means possible. In the above instance, Kusum uses the idea of marriage as good for the community since it generates blessings rained down from heaven. This need to produce capital for expensive weddings keeps Balram locked into servitude. Her persuasive language of marriage bringing more business through milk-producing buffaloes is one of the tempting advantages. Kusum interestingly mentions that thinking about marriage would be thinking about the community. Balram’s wish to remain unmarried is deemed selfish. Kusum’s ideology about marriage promotes it as a transactional relationship and not as a personal choice or decision made by an individual. These ideas indicate that she is ultimately motivated by money and her influence is exerted through blackmailing her family members to submit to her will. In this interaction between Balram and Kusum, she is being scripted by the hegemonic neoliberal structure of society. She feels obligated to generate wealth because of the lack of security that the neoliberal structure has given her. And she uses oppressive tactics to influence her family members to follow her plans to generate income.

The letter was sent to Balram, but his boss reads the initial sentences of this letter and gets frustrated that villagers are always requesting more money: “‘Life has become hard here. The rains have failed. Can you ask your employer for some money for your family? And remember to send the money home.’ The Mongoose put the letter down. ‘That’s all these servants want. Money, money, money. They’re called your servants, but they suck the lifeblood out of you, don’t they?’” (113) In this part of the letter, when Kusum asks Balram to talk to his boss about sending some money, the boss has a visceral reaction to the mention of money. He vaguely presumes Kusum to be his servant just as Balram is. And I speculate that this is because

she belongs to a village and her grandson works for him. But his reaction to her request shows he is ignorant of the plight of villagers in a place where he once belonged. This letter shows a disconnect between the three parties involved. Kusum does not endorse Balram's wish to stay unmarried, and the boss, whom Balram calls Mongoose, does not understand the financial struggles of the villagers.

Kusum challenges many stereotypes of the self-sacrificing, victimized third world woman. She has a lot of control over the men in her life, such as her sons and grandsons, and she has a reputation with the village landlords. The letter that she sends to Balram shows that she not only lacks a sense of sisterhood and community but she is also a highly competitive, individualistic woman. She takes up the role of being the family head, and she treats humans and animals as commodities. Adiga challenges the notion of villagers having a communal lifestyle through his portrayal of women like Kusum. There are basic assumptions that there will be a sense of "similarity" between the villagers and their families. However, Kusum is not governed by village loyalties or ideals of sisterhood. Adiga tackles the assumptions one would make of an old village woman like Kusum. Such women according to Western feminist discourse would be labeled as "powerless" (Mohanty 56). But Kusum's character exemplifies the hunger for power. She continues to take control of the family's resources to feed her power. Kusum's power is not out of choice, but it is due to the economically constrained environment. Although she does not seem the typical third world victim, she is still a victim of her financial circumstance.

Kusum's control and power over the women in her family results in her tending to take advantage of them in every way possible. She can commodify the members of her family: in fact, she is able to command them to be silent, oppressed, and to remain perpetual income-generators. Joseph indicates Kusum's commodification of her family members as a "form of cannibalism figured allegorically as the endemic violence that accompanies supra levels of rural

exploitation” (77). Mohanty explains that female-headed households in the poorer classes do not necessarily indicate women’s independence because life choices are constrained (Mohanty 68). That is to say, women’s poverty is undergirded by the system. While it is possible to state that there is a rise in female-headed households in the U.S. and in Latin America, this rise cannot be seen as a universal indicator of women’s independence, nor can it be discussed as a universal indicator of women’s impoverishment (Mohanty 68). Mohanty uses the examples of households in Latin America and the U.S. to explain the feminization of poverty. She mentions that in such communities, people are unable to make choices and have to make difficult leadership decisions out of desperation for their families.

Kusum’s case is similar. Adiga establishes a link between poverty and desperation in her family. Just as Mohanty states that female-headed households neither universally indicate women’s independence nor indicate women’s impoverishment, Kusum’s position as a rural neoliberal subject is muddy. She is not independent and is an impoverished member of society. She may come across as exemplifying a certain kind of independence but that is due to her feudal practices and hierarchies in rural space. She is oppressive to the women around her. The women, such as her daughters-in-law, do not share the same independence as her. They are at a disadvantage due to the complexity of class and gender politics. Their experiences as women are different from those of Kusum. She exploits her daughters-in-law and granddaughters-in-law monetarily and sexually. The women in her family are continually oppressed by the rigid feudal norms of Kusum’s family and village.

Although the women in her family belong to the same rural community, they are also treated like commodities by Kusum, and they do not have any shared experiences as women. There is no fundamental connection between these women, but they continue to oppose each other within Kusum’s dominance. Neoliberalism’s function in the rural areas is not only secured through the survival of older exploitative practices and feudal means. It isolates rural members

from one another. The rural family is separated from the communal lifestyle of the village. The collective lifestyle is replaced with feudalism that serves capitalism and the rural economic elites, isolating the members of the community. An example of women's isolation and objectification in the village is Kusum's relationship with Balram's mother. Kusum's relationship with Balram's mother is a mysterious one because she does not have a name and the narrator does not mention how she died. There are subtle mentions that may indicate Kusum to be the cause of her death. Balram mentions that Kusum looked happy at his mother's funeral (11). Kusum says that she did not want any conflict: "“She was a good, quiet girl the day she came to our home,’ Kusum said, as she put a hand on my face. ‘I was not the one who wanted any fighting’” (11). But Kusum contradicts herself in this interaction at the funeral. She first mentions that the mother was a well-behaved bride but then Kusum gets defensive, implying that everything that happened was not her fault. The wording she uses here implies that she was the cause of the conflict and of her death. The lack of conversation about the mother by Balram and other family members indicates the silencing of his mother's voice and legacy. Adiga uses the dead mother as an allegory for the death of the communal lifestyle. Kusum's survival represents the corruption and feudalism of the rural family unit.

Kusum's control over her male and female members of her family continues with the introduction of the new brides. Kusum would take advantage of them through a handsome dowry. In many ways, the bride's dowry is used to fulfill materialistic pleasures for Kusum's family:

It was one of the *good* marriages. We had the boy, and we screwed the girl's family hard. I remember exactly what we got in dowry from the girl's side, and thinking about it even now makes my mouth fill up with water: five thousand rupees cash, all crisp new unsoiled notes fresh from the bank, plus a Hero bicycle, plus a thick gold necklace for Kishan. (30)

Balram in his letters emphasizes the idea of a “good” marriage. He seems to be supportive of the patrilineal, sexist, and oppressive practices that are burdensome on the woman’s family.

Dowry in the novel is a clear example of a feudal kind of transaction. Dowry is the woman’s maintenance payment in a marriage, so women are commodified. However, in this case, the men are being treated as the commodity instead. Men are important commodities in the village and command a lot more respect than women. “Good quality men” demand more dowry and low quality men demand less. When I say “good quality men,” I mean men who have respectable jobs in the cities (Balram’s driving job fits into the criteria). Men who have a good reputation or come from well-reputed families or men of higher castes are considered “good quality men.” The “higher quality men” and their families offer the women security, safety, and the respect given to a married woman. And the dowry shows that the men the women are marrying are good men who will offer long-term social, financial, and even reproductive/sexual security. Balram says, “we had the boy, and we screwed the girl’s family hard.” Balram emphasizes to the reader that they “had the boy” which presents the “boy,” or potential bridegroom, as a commodity being exchanged by Kusum. Kusum has the upper hand here because she can profit from the marriage market given that she has a son. She takes advantage of the idea of dowry to gain material possessions. In the system of dowry in the rural areas, men are the commodities but it is the woman and her family who are at a disadvantage. The woman’s family is obligated to give whatever the groom’s family demands because the security that the bride will receive as a married woman surpasses all material comforts. Kusum continues to fulfill her material goals through the usage of dowry. In Harvey’s terms, she is the “economic elite” of the rural environment. The power structures are nuanced even in the rural areas.

Pinky Madam

Pinky Madam is Balram's boss and wife to Ashok Sharma, who studied in the U.S.A. and is an influential businessman in India. Pinky Madam is his American-born trophy wife who is dissatisfied in India and wants to go back to the U.S. She belongs to the urban space of India and resides in the capital city of Delhi. Her socio-economic class is higher than that of Balram and Kusum. The qualities that make her most attractive to the lower-class character is her having been born and raised in the U.S. and being able to speak really good English as a result. Balram enjoys the slang that he learns from her. Before he begins his story, he commemorates it and blesses it with the infamous quote Pinky Madam taught him, "*What a fucking joke*" (6).

Pinky Madam symbolizes neoliberal superiority. Although Balram denies being a theist anymore, she is the only goddess he obsessively venerates and worships, and he mentions Pinky Madam's quote before he begins his story. Pinky Madam has had an influence on Balram's life; he enjoys her aura and the way she speaks English. Pinky Madam is sometimes mean and abusive towards Balram. But he still respects her for what she symbolizes to him, which is urban prosperity and freedom. Just as with Kusum, Adiga uses Pinky Madam, a character from the opposite economic strata, to show the hypocrisy of neoliberalism in India. In the case of Kusum, neoliberalism neglects her basic human rights, but Pinky Madam is represented as being above human rights. The village women cannot afford to leave the vicious cycle of dowry, but Pinky Madam has the privilege to be able to divorce her husband and go back to the United States. The polarity between the privileges the two women hold is significant due to international class structures.

The national divisions of class between the women in the village and Pinky Madam complicate the hegemonic understanding of third world women. Hence the novel starts in a sarcastic, scoffing tone suggesting that neoliberalism is "a fucking joke." It is a system that has proved to be a farce, and Pinky Madam ultimately recognizes the commodification and the pretense of neoliberalism. Balram mentions that, out of all of his employers, Pinky Madam is

the one with a “conscience” (106). Pinky Madam uses this phrase numerous times to sarcastically express frustration with the social and economic system. For instance, she uses the phrase “what a fucking joke” to suggest that drinking and driving don’t matter in India since the law is not enforced (94). Mr. Ashok expresses similar frustration about the political system; he feels guilty when he passes by a Gandhi statue after bribing ministers (101). Adiga uses this phrase to further underscore the hypocrisy of the neoliberal system and the way it controls the characters through guilt, apathy, and compulsion. The characters are aware of the problems in the system but continue to feed it. Pinky Madam is categorized as part of the women of “light” and is idealized by Balram as someone superior to him. She is commodified and fetishized as a goddess because she represents the upper-class Indian.

Pinky Madam’s fetishization starts with Mr. Ashok. She fits the description of the “trophy wife.” According to the Oxford Learners Dictionary, a trophy wife is defined as “a young attractive woman who is married to an older person and thought of as a trophy (= something that shows that you are successful and impresses other people)” (oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com). The idea of a trophy wife is a contemporary phenomenon that is common in upper-class circles. Rich and powerful men like Mr. Ashok marry beautiful women like Pinky Madam as their status symbol. He is satisfied that everyone is fascinated and impressed by his Indian-American wife. Despite his family’s objections, the neoliberal dream of having a trophy wife trumps family traditions. This indicates that the urban class leans toward a modern approach to life and is forgoing past traditions. The modern approach to life suggests the neoliberal approach, where status, wealth, and class are an important part of life. Pinky Madam here is not only part of the neoliberal system, but she is commodified by it as Mr. Ashok’s trophy wife. She is offered as a status symbol for Mr. Ashok in India. This represents the class divide between rural and urban women. Rural and urban women are desired in different ways. Rural women are desired for the dowry they offer, and urban women serve as

trophy wives or eye candy. Both are sexualized and objectified for the pleasures of the patriarchy that exists along with neoliberalism. Within the context of neoliberalism, as Adiga depicts it, women are commodified in different ways, depending upon their class positioning.

Balram reveres Pinky Madam, comparing her to the goddess Sita. This was his first impression when he gazed upon her, “Now another face appears, to the side of his, in memory’s mirror. Pinky Madam—his wife. Every bit as good-looking as her husband; just as the image of the goddess in the Birla Hindu Temple in New Delhi is as fair as the god to whom she is married” (38). A woman represented as a Goddess is a common practice in the Indian subcontinent. It goes back to the ancient Hindu mythologies and texts. Rita Sherma Sadgupta in her article, *Sa Ham-Iam She: Woman as Goddess*, explains that tantric texts “contain numerous references to the initiation of women into lineages, female religious preceptors, and women as embodiment of the Goddess” (35). In the neoliberal context, a woman’s identity becomes malleable in religious, social/cultural, physical, and divine contexts (Kaura 27) and the woman’s body is a contested site of power (Kaura i). The symbolic Goddess is appropriated as a fetish of neoliberal commodities. In other words, Pinky Madam’s transformation into a goddess corresponds to Balram’s fetishization of wealth and elitism. Balram’s viewing of Pinky Madam as a goddess connects his devotional practices with his servitude. Superiority and divinity are related to physiological aspects of the body. Balram specifically notices her fair complexion and is mesmerized by it. He calls her “good-looking.” The celebration of a fair complexion must also be contextualized within a history of colonialism when British white skin was considered superior to Indian brown skin. These associations of skin color with superiority promote *mastery* over the lower class. Thus the upper class is fetishized because of their desired traits of class, fairer skin tone, and power. Pinky Madam’s superiority is reified as one of the Goddesses worshiped in Hindu temples.

The “goddess” ideology has been a ground for dominant patriarchal narratives. These narratives elevate the material subject into an idea or a representation. The Goddess encompasses all of nature and the cosmos. With nature and the cosmos in mind, Kaura explains that in historical and religious contexts, women are considered closer to nature than men because they represent the goddess and *are* goddesses (39). Women and the goddess are responsible for epitomizing cultural, historical, political, and social movements. She carries the weight of social and cultural expectations. Such patriarchal narratives are perpetuated through the nationalistic symbol of *Mother India*.

Pinky Madam becomes more of an ideological and cultural representation as a goddess than a real material subject. Mohanty’s articulation of the representational “Woman,” and the material subject “women,” was in the context of Western feminist stereotyping. But Adiga’s representation of Pinky Madam critiques the social and cultural gaze upon femininity within the neoliberal framework. Pinky Madam is appropriated as a goddess because she carries the representational burden of the “India of Light.” Balram’s servitude reveals the commodification of women. He perceives Pinky Madam as a Goddess through the Indian patriarchal narrative where she is defined as the divine-feminine Other (*Orientalism and Religion*, Richard King). Her traits of being fair, educated, modern, and rich exemplify the desirability of her class; hence, she is objectified. The objectification and the fetishization of Pinky Madam further complicate the “sisterhood” of third world women and her fetishization isolates her further from her contemporaries in the novel.

The third world woman in *The White Tiger* has numerous faces. Some of them will look like a dead mother, a trafficked woman, a dowry bartered bride, a feudal and rapacious lady, or a trophy wife to a wealthy urban businessman. These faces in the novel challenge the representation of the third world woman as being part of a sisterhood. The women in the novel function in the binary paradigm of urban or rural, light or dark, and modern or backward.

Women are continuously commodified in several forms based upon their class and socio-economic position.

Compared to the rest of the characters in the novel, Pinky Madam does not share the same struggles or traits as her contemporaries in the novel. Adiga presents her as a complex character. Pinky Madam may be fetishized and objectified by Mr. Ashok and by Balram, but she also possesses power and privilege. Pinky Madam's privilege and power are resistant to the third world woman "victim" narrative. She is an assertive and decisive woman. In addition, she is also a murderer which makes her—wittingly or unwittingly—the perpetrator of a crime. She made a victim out of a young girl who was walking at night.

There are practical implementations of certain feminist ideas, but these do not apply to everyone, only upper-class women. One of the feminist ideas that are implemented is the expression of Pinky Madam's sexuality: she can freely express her sexuality in front of her male servants because of her class in society. In urban India, upper-class women have the privilege to express their sexuality. Pinky Madam asserts her dominance and sexuality in front of her husband, her servants, and her in-laws, which is usually considered taboo. She is equally abusive towards Balram and treats him like his male bosses do. This indicates that class trumps gender in a neoliberal framework. She wears sexy clothes in front of Balram, and he tries his best to control himself because he considers her to be like a mother:

When she sat in the back, I could see half her boobs hanging out of her clothes each time I had to look in the rearview mirror. This put me in a very bad situation, sir. For one thing, my beak was aroused, which is natural in a healthy young man like me. On the other hand, as you know, master and mistress are like father and mother to you, so how can you get excited by the mistress? (83)

Here we might consider how Irigaray considers the male gaze, in which "the man looks and the woman is looked at" (Tyson 102). In this narration, Balram is not enjoying the gaze because he

does not have the privilege to do so. On the contrary, he is annoyed because of the social nuances of class and power. Neoliberalism does not truly empower women but affords superficial power. Due to class, Pinky Madam turns from an object into a subject to dominate a man. She continues to use her sexuality to assert power around her. Her power to express her sexuality and manipulate men as a woman in neoliberal India contradicts the Western narrative of third world women being “powerless.” Pinky Madam does not join the sisterhood of lower-class women who are victims of sexual violence and the male gaze. She does not share the same oppression as the trafficked women, including the lady Mr. Ashok continued to stare at (Adiga 117). Her sexual power relates to her class, since feminist individualism is a byproduct of neoliberalism. Needless to say, her limited and limiting brand of entrepreneurial feminism is not accessible to all women because of the social and class divisions caused by neoliberal society.

Pinky Madam has the power to divorce her husband whenever she wants to. And she does so when she feels uncomfortable with Ashok’s family. Family is the most important social unit in Indian society, and loyalty is given the utmost significance. Divorce is highly stigmatized, and the reputations of the members of the family, especially the woman’s, are ruined. Many characters in the novel see divorce negatively: “‘It’s a divorce—every rich man these days is divorcing his wife. These rich people...’ He shook his head. His lips curled up in scorn, exposing his reddish, rotting, *paan*-decayed canines. ‘No respect for God, for marriage, family—nothing’” (108). In traditional Indian households, most women are dependent on their husbands. A wife’s devotion to her husband is considered essential in the Indian patriarchal family (Khan, Michelle, and Eraly 2008). Kupier states “women were expected to treat their husbands as if they were gods, and obedience of wives to husbands has remained a strong social norm” (46). In the urban neoliberal system, such traditions are broken only if the woman belongs to an upper class—as does Pinky Madam. Pinky Madam’s position and privilege are

similar to a Western woman's privilege. Mohanty describes Western women as, "educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions" (Mohanty 56). In and of itself there is nothing wrong with this aspect of feminism; however, the idea of "freedom" and autonomy is tied to upward mobility for the individual, not to social welfare. David Harvey speaks of a "transnational ruling class" within neoliberalism. Pinky Madam belongs to this economic strata.

Through Western eyes, third world women are described as "tradition bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc" (Mohanty 56). Pinky Madam breaks all the traditional bounds and decides to leave her husband. She dominates her husband through the divorce because this event brought humiliation to him and his family. She is able to make her own decisions for herself because of her upper-class position in society. Despite the comments of the lower-class servants, their opinions do not hold value because of their social position. Her ability to divorce is a powerful privilege that exemplifies her class status. Her class privilege continues to triumph over her gender position. Neoliberalism is selective in terms of the privileges and rights one has.

One of the most significant turning points in the novel is when Pinky Madam hits a child while she is driving drunk. Adiga takes a punch at neoliberalism in the incident in which Pinky Madam is apathetic to the consequences, "What a fucking joke! Everyone in India drinks and drives. But you won't let *me* do it?" (94). Later Balram speaks about the murdered girl like her life did not hold any value and her death is nothing to be concerned about. He specifically mentions that the girl belongs to the India of "darkness":

You know how those people in the Darkness are: they have eight, nine, ten children—sometimes they don't know the names of their own children. Her parents—if they're even here in Delhi, if they even know where she is tonight—won't go to the police. (98)

Despite being an innocent child, the girl's value as a human being is less than the value afforded the people of "light." Balram explains that she may not be missed even by her own family members because the lower-class do not even know how many children they have birthed. Balram interestingly says that even if her parents feel she's missing, they will not go to the police because the police will mistreat them even more. The people of the Darkness in the novel know the justice system will not be on their side because they do not hold any wealth or power. The justice system in a neoliberal, capitalist nation will serve the economic elites.

Adiga continues to prove that the economic elites triumph over the justice system when Balram becomes a scapegoat in the case. In the incident where Balram is obliged to show his loyalty, he reiterates the idea that India's neoliberalism is a farce: "We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse. Yes, that's right: we all live in the world's greatest democracy. *What a fucking joke*" (101). Adiga consistently employs allegory and satire from the mouth of Balram to express the ironies of the neoliberal system.

Democracy and its definition are pressured here, just as the river Ganga is represented as being choked and suffocated (Joseph 90). Balram shows that democracy here is silent and cannot speak. Democracy is an imaginary concept because hypocrisy and corruption overpower it. In *Neoliberalism and Allegory*, Joseph discusses the awakening of congealed life in objects that are considered ancient or historical (90). Democracy is neither ancient nor does it hold historical significance in India's past. However, it is implemented in modern India as a means of social and economic progress. Adiga continues to question democracy by using Balram to ventriloquize for neoliberalism and demonstrating the commodification of women and their bodies. The justice system, or the law, continues to favor the economic elites. The class divisions between upper-class women and lower-class women in the novel are different in terms of their fetishization, commodification, and classism. Neoliberalism instrumentalizes social codings of gender in a democratic, capitalist, and (residual) feudal system. The allegory in

the text texturizes a woman's disenfranchisement in society. Paradoxically, the disenfranchisement can be seen in the power that Pinky Madam and Kusum hold over the justice system and family members. Both female characters use their power to dominate other characters in the novel, whether it is through class or feudal tactics.

Conclusion

Gender hierarchies and class struggles continue to be an unfortunate reality in *The White Tiger*. The women, specifically Pinky Madam and Kusum, are positioned differently in the neoliberal system, showcasing the advantage of the economic elites in the system. Meanwhile, Adiga questions and challenges the representation of generalized third world women as “weak,” “victimized” or sharing a certain feeling of “sisterhood.” The class structure in neoliberalism creates many binaries that continue to separate and isolate women. This isolation is part of capitalist commodification and the fetishization of women. The intranational class divisions in the text complicate the idea of third world women in terms of their access to resources, the way they are objectified by other men or women, and their privileges. Adiga uses allegory and satire to represent the hypocrisy and irony that neoliberalism creates. This hypocrisy continues to feed the hegemonic formulas of light and dark, urban and rural, modern and backward exemplified by the various female characters of the novel. The satire and sarcasm in the novel index that neoliberalism does not live up to the moral standards that it claims to support, as it suggests it will advance “human well-being” through the liberation of the market and trade. Adiga's representation of women shows that neoliberalism does not create equal rights, privileges, and opportunities for all, but instead creates more barriers.

Works Cited

- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger: A Novel*. New York: Free Press, 2008. Print.
- Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Hartanto, Erika Citra Sari. "Power and Ambivalence: Reading the Indian Women Characters in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Research Gate*, July 2015, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338688403_Power_and_Ambivalence_Reading_the_Indian_Women_Characters_in_Aravind_Adiga's_The_White_Tiger.
- Hiltebeitel, Alf, et al. "Sa Ha-I Am She: Woman as Goddess." *Is the Goddess a Feminist?: The Politics of South Asian Goddesses*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002.
- Joseph, Betty. "Neoliberalism and Allegory." *Cultural Critique*, vol. 82, 2012, pp. 68–94. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.82.2012.0068>. Accessed 24 July 2022.
- Kaura, Kate. "The Body of the Goddess: Religious and Political Power of the Indian Female Body and Ruptures of Resistance." *The Ohio State University*, Ohio State University Graduate Program of Comparative Studies, 2018, pp. 1–61.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and The Mystic East*. Routledge, 2009.
- Kupier, Kathleen. *Understanding India: The Culture of India*. Britannica Educational Publishing, 2011, <https://sciarium.com/file/33750/>.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 2015, pp. 208–232., <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315656496-24>.
- Tickell, Alex. "Driving Pinky Madam (and Murdering Mr Ashok): Social Justice and Domestic Service in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Reworking Postcolonialism*, 2015, pp. 150–164. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137435934_10.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2023.