The White Tiger

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARAVIND ADIGA

Aravind Adiga is a writer and journalist raised in India and Australia. He studied English literature at Columbia College and Oxford University. Before pursuing his career as a fiction writer, Adiga worked as both a correspondent for *Time Magazine* and a financial journalist for the *Financial Times*. His experience working as a business journalist caused him to mistrust business magazines and get-rich-quick literature, informing the tone with which he describes India's economic boom in *The White Tiger*. He currently lives in Mumbai, India.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The White Tiger takes place in modern day India, but Balram traces the socioeconomic inequality with which he struggles back to 1947: the year India gained its independence from Britain through the Indian Independence Act. The act made India independent, which quickly led to race riots between Muslim and Hindu Indians, and the establishment of Muslim Pakistan as a separate independent state. In the 1960s, shortly after gaining their independence, Indians abolished the Caste System, which had rigidly enforced the social role of all Indians under British Rule and for thousands of years before that. Balram believes that the disorganization and chaos following the end of the caste system has contributed to even more extreme inequality. The action of *The White Tiger* takes place in economically flourishing modern India. After approaching bankruptcy in 1991, the Indian government received a major loan from the International Monetary Fund and began a program of economic liberalization, resulting in a high rate of economic growth and foreign investment that continues to this day. Unfortunately, the economic boom has also drastically increased income inequality. *The White Tiger* tells the story of those left behind in the midst of India's rapid economic rise.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Adiga considers a range of authors from different literary periods as his personal influences. He identifies three black American novelists—Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison—as his primary influences in writing *The White Tiger*. Ellison's *Invisible Man* in particular seeks to give the invisible, disenfranchised members of American society—namely, a black man—a voice, just as Adiga reveals the injustices that thousands of poor Indians continue to suffer today through Balram's story. Balram's belief in himself as an exceptional person or White Tiger, and his related belief that he is entitled to live according to his own alternative moral standards, is similar to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in which the central character, Raskolnikov, convinces himself that his exceptional need and capabilities justify murdering and robbing a defenseless old woman, just as Balram's drive him to murder his master. Yet the contrast between the two books is also instructive. Raskolnikov commits his crime, is driven almost mad by guilt, ultimately confesses (and would have been caught anyway), and then has a religious epiphany in a Siberian prison camp while with the woman he loves who followed him to the camp. Balram commits his crime, feels a little guilt, cuts himself off from his family forever (and likely dooms his family to death), bribes the police to make himself invulnerable, and luxuriates in his success and holds himself up as an entrepreneurial exemplar. This contrast illustrates a tremendous difference between the two societies depicted in *Crime and Punishment* and *The White Tiger*, one with the culture and institutions that result in crime being punished both morally and legally, the other so corrupt that crime can be seen as the perpetrator as necessary, as moral, as a path to well-earned wealth.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The White Tiger*
- **When Written:** 2005-2008
- **Where Written:** USA and India
- **When Published:** 2008
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Modern day India
- **Climax:** *The White Tiger* does not strictly conform to a linear, chronological format, as Balram's narration jumps constantly between different periods of his life. However, the novel is loosely structured around Balram's murder of his master Mr. Ashok. His decision to record his life story is in part an attempt to explain the series of events that led to the crime, and to describe life in its aftermath.
- **Antagonist:** While Balram's master Ashok may be his most obvious antagonist, Balram perceives many characters in the novel to be his enemies. These characters include his own family members, particularly his grandmother Kusum, as well as Ashok's family: the Stork, Mukesh Sir, and Pinky Madam. Finally, his fellow servants in the Stork's household, Ram Bahadur and Ram Persad, are also briefly his antagonists.
- **Point of View:** *The White Tiger* is the first-person narrative of Balram Halwai's life. Balram recounts his story in a letter to a visiting Chinese official with the goal of educating the official about entrepreneurship in India.

EXTRA CREDIT

Man Booker. When *The White Tiger* won the 2008 Man-Booker literary prize, Adiga became the fourth Indian-born author to win the prestigious award.

PLOT SUMMARY

The White Tiger is the story of Balram Halwai's life as a self-declared "self-made entrepreneur": a rickshaw driver's son who skillfully climbs India's social ladder to become a chauffer and later a successful businessman. Balram recounts his life story in a letter to visiting Chinese official Premier Wen Jiabao, with the goal of educating the premier about entrepreneurship in India.

Balram writes from his luxurious office in the city of Bangalore, but the story begins in his rural ancestral village of Laxmangahr. Throughout his childhood, Balram's destitute family lives at the mercy of four cruel, exploitative landlords, referred to as "The Animals": The Raven, The Stork, The Buffalo, and The Wild Boar. Despite the difficult life he is born into, Balram excels in school. His academic potential and personal integrity distinguish him from his classmates, bringing him to the attention of a visiting school inspector who nicknames him "**the White Tiger**," after the most rare and intelligent creature in the jungle.

Balram's parents recognize his potential and want him to complete his education, but his grandmother Kusum removes him from school early on so that he can work to support the family. Balram is determined to continue his education however he can. When he and his brother Kishan begin working in a teashop in nearby Dhanbad, Balram neglects his duties and spends his days listening to customers' conversations. He overhears one customer speaking wistfully about the high earnings and easy life that India's private chauffeurs enjoy, and begs his grandmother to send him to driving school. Kusum agrees, but Balram must promise to send home his wages once he finds a job.

His training complete, Balram knocks on the doors of Dhanbad's rich families, offering his services. By a stroke of luck, he arrives at the mansion of the Stork (one of Laxmangahr's animal landlords) one day after the Stork's son, Mr. Ashok, returns from America with his wife Pinky Madam. The family hires Balram to become Ashok's driver. In reality, Balram is more of a general servant to the family, while another servant, Ram Persad, has the privilege of driving them.

Balram learns that the Stork's family fortune comes from illegally selling coal out of government mines. They bribe ministers to turn a blind eye to their fraudulent business and allow the family to avoid paying income tax. Unfortunately, the family recently had a disagreement with the region's ruling politician, referred to as the Great Socialist. The family dispatches Ashok and Pinky to Delhi, where Ashok will distribute more bribes to make amends. When Balram learns that the couple will need a driver in Delhi, he schemes to have Ram Persad dismissed, and goes in his place.

Once in Delhi, Balram witnesses Pinky and Ashok's marriage rapidly fall apart. Pinky returns to the US and leaves her husband after she kills a young child in a drunken, hit-and-run accident. In her absence, Ashok goes out to bars and clubs, hiring a prostitute one night, and reconnecting with a former lover on another. Observing his master's gradual corruption and driving him through Dehli's seedier districts, Balram becomes disillusioned and resentful. Although Ashok is a relatively kind master, Balram realizes that whatever generosity Ashok has shown him is only a fraction of what he can afford. Ashok has no real interest in helping Balram achieve a better life, or in changing the status quo.

Balram plans to murder Ashok and escape with the bag of the money that he carries around the city to bribe politicians. In addition to the risk of being caught, Balram must contend with the logic of **"the Rooster Coop":** the system of oppression in which India's poor, including Balram himself, are trapped. Balram knows that if he kills Ashok, Ashok's family will murder all his own relatives in Laxmangahr in retaliation. Balram is also held back by the arrival in Delhi of his young cousin Dharam, who Kusum sends from Dhanbad with the demand that Balram help raise him.

Balram finally resolves to proceed with the murder, using a weapon he has fashioned out of a broken liquor bottle. One day as he drives Ashok to deliver a particularly large bribe, Balram pretends that there is a mechanical problem with the car. He pulls over, convinces Ashok to kneel down and examine the wheel, then brings the broken bottle down on Ashok's head. After killing his master, he returns to Ashok's apartment, collects Dharam, and escapes with his young cousin to Bangalore.

Once Balram regains his nerves in Bangalore enough not to fear immediate capture, he begins wandering the city and listening to conversations in cafes –just as he did in the teashop in Dhanbad—to plan his next move. He soon learns that Bangalore's business world revolves around outsourcing, and that many large technology companies work on a nocturnal schedule. Balram creates a taxi company called White Tiger Drivers to bring call center workers home safely at night, and the venture is an enormous success.

By the time he sits down to tell his story, Balram is a wealthy man who keeps to himself, still fearful that one day his crime will be discovered. However, he concludes his letter to Wen Jiabao claiming that even if he is found out, he will never regret his crime: it was worth committing simply because it enabled him to experience life as a free man rather than as a servant.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Balram Halwai – Born only with the name "Munna" – Boy – and by the end of the novel known as "Ashok Sharma," Balram is the novel's narrator and protagonist. *The White Tiger* is the story of his life as a self-declared "self-made entrepreneur": a rickshaw driver's son who climbs India's social ladder to become a chauffer and later a successful businessman. He recounts his life story in a letter to visiting Chinese official Premier Jiabao, with the goal of educating the premier about entrepreneurship in India. He describes his journey, from growing up poor in the rural village of Laxmangahr to living the life of a successful businessman in Bangalore, with dry and cynical humor. He proudly admits to the corrupt and sometimes murderous schemes and behavior that helped him climb to the top of Indian Society. In order to survive in modern India, he has chosen to live on his own terms, founded on his sense of himself as a "**white tiger**": a rare creature with superior intelligence subject, because of his specialness, to an alternative moral code that justifies any action that helps him get ahead.

Mr. Ashok – The Stork's son and Balram's master. Ashok recently returned from America and has a gentler, milder personality compared to his wealthy and entitled family members. He feels disillusioned by the widespread corruption in India and his family's role in it, but goes along with his relatives, handing out bribes to ministers and currying favor with politicians. Compared to the other wealthy people around him, Ashok demonstrates more outward signs of compassion for Balram, seeming to take an interest in his servant's welfare and trusting him entirely. Ashok becomes increasingly decadent and goes into something of a downward spiral after his wife, Pinky Madam, leaves him and goes back to America. Balram feels a strong, mysterious connection to his master, but after several months in his service concludes that Ashok is no less cruel and selfish than his father and brother, that the generosity he offers is not nearly what he could afford to give.

Kusum – The matriarch of Balram's family, his grandmother Kusum runs the household according to tough, traditional Indian family values. Primarily concerned with the family's short-term financial solvency, Kusum removes her young relatives from school prematurely to work and marries them off as children, compromising their long-term ability to support themselves and their families. Though she agrees to send Balram to driving school, she does so on the condition that Balram send home his earnings each month. Even after Balram moves away, Kusum exerts her influence from afar by sending him threatening letters and eventually his young cousin Dharam, who she demands he care for in Delhi. As Balram sees it, Kusum is completely dominated by the logic of the Rooster Coop: she has struggled her whole life to survive under the burden of such great oppression, that she does not know any better and unconsciously brings her family down with her.

Pinky Madam – Ashok's beautiful, Americanized wife. Pinky is a demanding, critical and cruel mistress to Balram. She is unhappy in India and eager to return to the US, which puts a strain on her marriage to Ashok. After killing a young child in a hit- and-run accident, Pinky, because she is rich, is able to evade any legal complications and flies back to America and abruptly ends her marriage.

Wen Jiabao – The Chinese Premier to whom Balram addresses his letter and narrates his life story. Jiabao is a visiting Chinese official who expresses interest in learning the secrets of Indian entrepreneurship, so he can return to foster entrepreneurship in China. Balram knows that Jiabao will only learn the official story of Indian business from the politicians he meets, which is why he takes it upon himself to tell Jiabao the truth about entrepreneurialism in his country by using himself as an example.

Vikram Halwai – Balram's father is a poor, illiterate rickshaw driver who dies of tuberculosis early in the novel. During his life, he fights to the best of his ability to fulfill his wife's wish that Balram be given an opportunity to finish his education and move up in the world. Balram traces his struggle for upward mobility to a wish his father once expressed: that although he himself spent his life being treated "like a donkey," he wants one of his sons to be able to live like a man.

Balram's Mother – Balram's mother dies when he is a young boy in Laxmangahr. Though she is a minor figure in the background of his life, Balram recounts that she had great ambitions for him, her favorite son, and insisted he finish his education. There was lifelong tension between Balram's mother and grandmother Kusum, who does not believe in helping Balram realize his potential. Witnessing his mother's funeral on the banks of the Ganges as a child, Balram understands the hopelessness and futility of her life, and resolves to make a better future for himself as she would have wanted.

Kishan – Kishan is Balram's older brother who cares for him after their father dies. Though Kishan is an influential, fatherly figure in Balram's life, Balram laments his brother's lack of "entrepreneurial spirit": in other words, his inability to stand up to Kusum and make his own decisions, as Balram does. Kishan allows Kusum to work him hard, take most of his wages, and arrange his marriage early in life, before he can support a family.

Dharam – Balram's young cousin, who Kusum sends to Delhi for Balram to mentor. Dharam's arrives at a crucial moment, complicating things just as Balram is devising his plan to murder Ashok and escape with his master's money. Balram eventually carries out the murder anyway and flees Delhi with Dharam,

continuing to care for the young boy after establishing himself in Bangalore.

The Stork – One of the four animal landlords of Laxmangahr, father of Mr. Ashok and Mukesh Sir. He owns the river outside of Laxmangahr, and taxes any villager who fishes there or boats across it. The bulk of his family's fortune, however, comes from illegally selling coal out of government mines. He distributes generous bribes to political officials who turn a blind eye to his fraudulent dealings, and allow him to evade income tax.

The Mongoose – Ashok's brother, also referred to as Mukesh Sir. Mukesh Sir suspects that Balram is dishonest from their very first meeting, and disapproves of Ashok's lenient attitude towards his servant. Unlike Ashok who has recently returned from living abroad in the US, Mukesh Sir accepts India's dishonest political scene and participates willingly in his family's corrupt dealings. He visits Delhi regularly to help Ashok distribute bribes on schedule and, after Pinky Madam's departure, to comfort him in his loneliness.

Ram Persad – The Stork's "number one" family servant. Though he and Balram sleep in the same bedroom, they despise one another and compete in every aspect of their lives. When Balram first arrives, Ram Persad drives Ashok and Pinky Madam around in the luxurious Honda City, while Balram drives other members of the household in the humble Maruti Suzuki. Balram ultimately brings about Ram Persad's dismissal from the Stork's household when he discovers that Persad is a practicing Muslim, who has hidden his faith from his prejudiced masters with the help of Ram Bahadur.

Vijay – Balram's personal hero from his hometown of Laxmangahr. Balram admires Vijay for his ambition and entrepreneurial spirit: in particular, for his ability to swiftly and completely reinvent his identity in order to rise up in the world. Vijay was born a pig farmer's son, but through hard work (or, as Balram suggests is more likely, corrupt dealings with politicians) becomes a bus driver, then a political activist, and finally a prominent official in the Great Socialist's party.

Great Socialist –The Great Socialist has dominated the political scene in the Darkness for as long as Balram can remember. While the Great Socialist presents himself as a populist leader serving the poor, he and his corrupt ministers murder, rape, embezzle funds, and rig elections to stay in power. Balram's childhood hero Vijay supports the party, moving up through its ranks over the years to become one of its leading politicians. At the end of the novel, the Great Socialist gains a foothold in the national government, ousting the ruling party. As a result, even the Stork's wealthy and powerful family is forced to deliver bribes and curry favor with its leadership.

Vitiligo-Lips –The driver of another wealthy businessman who lives in Ashok's apartment complex. He has Vitiligo, a skin disease that results in the loss of skin pigmentation. Vitiligo-Lips takes a liking to Balram and attempts to help him adjust to Delhi. At first, his mentorship takes the form of supplying Balram with murder magazines and answering Balram's questions about city life. Later in the novel, Vitiligo-Lips helps Balram procure a prostitute and begin to cheat Mr. Ashok out of his money.

Ram Bahadur (the Nepali) – A cruel Nepali servant in The Stork's household who torments Balram, while helping Ram Persad conceal his Muslim identity from his employers. When Balram discovers Ram Persad's secret and Ram Bahadur's role in covering up for his coworker, he blackmails Ram Bahadur into helping him become Ashok's number one driver in Delhi.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Wild Boar – One of the four animal landlords who owns all of the fertile agricultural land around Laxmangahr. He is known for grinning predatorily at female villagers, exposing his long, curved teeth. Ashok and Pinky lunch at his house when they return to visit Laxmangahr.

The Buffalo – The greediest of the four animal landlords, known for heavily taxing rickshaw drivers who travel on his roads.

The Raven – One of the four animal landlords, known for sexually abusing shepherds who bring their animals to graze on his land.

Mr. Krishna – Balram's corrupt schoolteacher, who gives him his name. Mr. Krishna steals the funds intended to pay for school lunches because he never receives his salary.

Ms. Uma – Ashok's former lover, who he meets again after Pinky Madam's departure.

Dilip – A cousin of Balram and Kishan who travels with them to Dhanbad to find work.

The Minister's Assistant – The corrupt official who convinces Ashok to hire a Ukrainian prostitute

Anastasia – A prostitute Balram hires through Vitiligo-Lips

The Inspector – A school inspector who calls Balram "**a white tiger**," establishing Balram's sense of himself as a special person deserving of greater things.

Muslim Bookseller – A bookseller in Old Delhi.

Mohammad Asif – Balram's employee at White Tiger Drivers, who hits and kills a cyclist. Balram uses his money to bribe his company out of any legal difficulties.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE SELF-MADE MAN

The White Tiger is the story of Balram Halwai's life as a self-declared "self-made entrepreneur": a rickshaw driver's son who climbs India's social ladder to become a chauffer and later a successful businessman. Balram recounts his life story in a letter to visiting Chinese official Premier Jiabao, with the goal of educating the premier about entrepreneurship in India. Though Jiabao is primarily interested in learning about entrepreneurship within the context of business and finance, Balram's broad understanding of entrepreneurial activity –and also the scope of his story— complicates this traditional sense of the term. He believes that any Indian who acts to take charge of his own social and economic destiny qualifies as a true entrepreneur.

According to Balram, one primary characteristic of the self-made Indian man is his ability to repeatedly transform himself—to not only change his profession, uniform and outward presentation, but also his very identity. Balram believes that a fluid approach to identity is essential for successful entrepreneurship. He adopts a new name each time he moves up within India's social hierarchy—Munna, Balram, Ashok, **The White Tiger**—and describes with admiration his childhood hero Vijay, a pig farmer's son turned wealthy politician, for his versatile sense of self.

Balram claims that self-made entrepreneurs are not only adaptable with respect to identity, but also subject to a more fluid legal and moral code. Throughout the novel he argues that entrepreneurs in India can only become successful by breaking the law, and that this fact justifies their criminal activity. As a servant who murders his master and rises in society without suffering any consequences, Balram embodies this principle. At the same time, his triumphant retelling of his crimes and minimal expression of remorse paints a bleak portrait of Indian society. It is a world in which rising to the top involves cultivating indifference to human suffering, particularly the suffering of one's inferiors. Balram's own experience of cruelty at the hands of his more powerful masters seems not to contribute to his sense of compassion, but rather to his desire to become a master himself.

SOCIAL BREAKDOWN, SELF-INTEREST, AND CORRUPTION

Balram's rise within Indian Society takes place in the aftermath of India's liberation from British Rule (which lasted from 1858 to 1947) and the overthrow of India's traditional caste system. Though the caste system unjustly segregated India's population and restricted social mobility, locking each member firmly into a single way of life, Balram maintains that its abolition did nothing to improve inequality. Instead, he describes how India went from being an orderly "zoo" where each member of the thousand castes at least had his or her place, to being a jungle where only the law of predator or prey, eat or be eaten, applies. One either fights ruthlessly for self-advancement at the expense of others, or becomes a slave to those more powerful.

This chaotic struggle for power and survival results in two parallel Indias: **the Darkness** (poor, rural India) and **the Light** (urban, wealthy, sophisticated India). The extremely wealthy people of Light India oppress the extremely poor people of Dark India to such a degree that those in the Darkness are not even conscious of their own oppression. Over the course of the novel, as Balram becomes increasingly aware of the corrupt forces that maintain this stark inequality, he develops the metaphor of **the Rooster Coop**: a system in which oppression of the poor is so complete that the oppressed internalize and perpetuate their own subjugation.

In a country where the rules are stacked so overwhelmingly against the poor, Balram comes to believe that to create a better life and "break out of the Rooster Coop," one must be willing to sacrifice everything, including attachment to traditional ideas of good versus bad and even one's family. In short, individuals must willfully become radically independent and prioritize wealth and power over morals to escape the oppression of a corrupt society. Balram's escape from poverty and lack of consequences for his crimes result in a belief that the end justifies the means, and frees him from having to examine himself (or his world) more critically.

EDUCATION

The White Tiger is a story about how education, formal and otherwise, shapes individuals. Balram first receives his nickname –The White Tiger—in a classroom setting. Though over the course of the novel he attempts to embody his name by cultivating a ruthless, cunning streak and competing in Indian society, he originally earned the description for academic promise and integrity.

After being pulled out of school at an early age, Balram is left with only bits and pieces of a formal education. This leads him to refer to himself as a "half-baked" or "half-cooked" Indian. He sees his "half-cooked" education not as a weakness, but rather as one of the preconditions for an entrepreneurial spirit. He believes that having to take responsibility for one's own education requires and builds an inventive, resourceful mind, and responds to the abrupt end of his schooling by learning what he can on the job. He claims he is not an original thinker, but rather an original listener, and pieces together an understanding of India by eavesdropping at work, transforming dead-end, menial jobs into learning opportunities.

As an adult, Balram respects traditional learning to a degree. He enjoys the proximity and physical presence of books, but also sneers at the musty, "foul taste" they leave in his mouth.

Balram claims to learn more from "the road and the pavement"—from studying the constant changes of Indian society to cultivate the flexibility and adaptability he believes a self-made man should possess. In general, Balram emphasizes the importance of being attuned to one's surroundings. As a child, he alone out of all the villagers becomes fascinated with **the Black Fort:** a beautiful old building in his town constructed by a foreign power years ago. He claims that the other villagers "remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world," and that by contrast, his innate ability to find interest and beauty in his environment marked him early on as deserving of a better life.

FAMILY

Throughout the novel, Balram describes family as a destructive and burdensome part of Indian life, one that prevents its members from pursuing individual advancement and liberty. Balram's grandmother Kusum embodies this negative image of family in the story. She shortsightedly pulls both Balram and his brother Kishan out of school at a young age, and attempts to arrange both brothers' marriages early in life, before they are able to support families of their own. The rich are similarly burdened by familial obligation and interference. Even Balram's wealthy master Ashok complains of his father and brothers' attempts to exert control over ***his*** personal life.

Balram further believes that the traditional Indian family unit keeps the Rooster Coop of social inequality alive. If a servant attempts to escape or disobeys his employer, the superior's family will punish the servant by murdering or brutally torturing *his* family. In this way, familial loyalty and love become weaknesses that can stop an individual from being able to advance. The arrival of Balram's young cousin Dharam in Dehli fits into this pattern. Just when Balram has resolved to murder his master Ashok, Kusum sends Dharam to live and work with Balram. For better or for worse, this new responsibility of caring for his relative initially prevents him from executing his plan and taking a radical step to alter his future. Ultimately, though, Balram does carry out his plan to murder Ashok, knowingly sacrificing his own family to brutal and probably fatal vengeance in the process. He cuts loose his own family in order to free himself. That the family plays this negative role in Balram's world is a reflection of the deeply corrupt and immoral state of Indian society, which transforms even the most sacred, intimate relationships between people into tools of oppression that someone like Balram feels he must escape in order to achieve freedom and success.

MORALITY AND INDIAN SOCIETY

The White Tiger portrays an India that has not only lost its traditional social structure, but also outgrown a conventional moral framework. Balram's description of the Light India versus the Dark India in the novel, which subverts usual associations of "Light" with virtue, and "Darkness" with immorality, reflects this upset of moral values. Light India is not virtuous at all. Rather, its members do whatever necessary to preserve their own wealth and power, acting morally only when it is convenient for them. They are "Light" primarily in the sense that they can actually see the "light" of wealth and luxury, much as a plant might grow tall enough to see the light of day and further its own growth. Meanwhile, Rooster Coop logic prevails over Dark India: men dutifully behave according to familial and religious values, but they do so because they are terrified into submission, not out of genuine desire to lead a good life. In both cases, people sacrifice morality as they fight for survival within India's cutthroat social landscape.

Traditional Indian values founded on deep religious faith and the teachings of venerated national heroes like Gandhi are similarly comprised. Throughout the book, Balram goes through the motions of religious faith and prayer largely to impress his master with his devotion. Yet he argues that he is both "sly and sincere, believing and mocking" at the same time: that this fickle embrace of faith is typical of Indian culture. Indians have a deep yearning for their past, when their country strived so heroically to define the terms of morality for itself, and yet this attachment does not necessarily inspire them to uphold those time-honored values.

In the midst of India's moral upset, Balram develops his own personal moral framework founded on his sense of himself as a "white tiger": a rare creature with superior intelligence who lives in the jungle but is exempt from its rules. His embrace of this notion that he is special and therefor *deserves* to exist outside legal and moral codes allows him to justify murdering his master Ashok, knowingly and callously exposing his own family to likely fatal vengeance, so that he can begin his first business—White Tiger Drivers—with Ashok's money. Balram jokes, "The devil was once God's sidekick until he went freelance." He believes that the struggle to escape social and economic subjugation in Indian society, to go "freelance" and achieve control over one's future, trumps traditional notions of good vs. evil, God vs. the devil, rendering actions the reader might consider immoral understandable, and yet also depicting the society that could make such actions understandable as brutally lost and corrupt.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE WHITE TIGER

Balram's natural intelligence and integrity set him apart from his peers from an early age. On one occasion, his academic prowess so impresses a visiting school inspector that the official calls him a "White Tiger": the most noble and intelligent animal in the jungle. Throughout his life, Balram's concept of himself as a White Tiger and as an exceptional person motivates him to advocate for himself and fight for his own advancement. His conviction that he is somehow special also causes him to feel exempt from traditional moral and legal standards, empowered to live life on his own terms.

The morning before he murders his master Ashok, Balram encounters a white tiger in the Delhi zoo. After locking eyes with the animal and fainting on the spot, he decides to commit the murder and dictates a letter to his grandmother Kusum apologizing in advance, and explaining that he cannot live in a cage any longer. Balram's identification with his namesake emboldens him and convinces him that he is justified in moving forward with his plan.

THE ROOSTER COOP

The Rooster Coop is Balram's metaphor for describing the oppression of India's poor. Roosters in a coop at the market watch one another slaughtered one by one, but are unable or unwilling to rebel and break out of the coop. Similarly, India's poor people see one another crushed by the wealthy and powerful, defeated by the staggering inequality of Indian society, but are unable to escape the same fate. In fact, he argues that the poor actively stop each other from escaping, either willfully by cutting each other down, or less purposely but just as powerfully, through a culture that makes them expect such abuse and servitude. The Rooster Coop Balram describes is one that's "guarded from the inside."

Balram believes that the traditional Indian family unit keeps the Rooster Coop of social inequality alive. If a servant attempts to escape or disobeys his employer, the superior's family will punish the servant by murdering or brutally torturing *his* family. In this way, familial loyalty and love become weaknesses in the context of rooster coop logic. In a country where the rules are stacked so overwhelmingly against the poor, Balram comes to believe that to create a better life and "break out of the Rooster Coop," one must be willing to sacrifice everything, including attachment to traditional morals *and* to one's family.

THE BLACK FORT

Looking back on his past from his luxurious office in Bangalore, Balram imagines what the detectives and police would have found out about him had they returned to his home village of Laxmangahr. He laughs to himself that the police would never discover the true clue to what differentiated him from the other villagers, what made him capable of imagining a better life: his fascination with the Black Fort.

The Black Fort was the only thing of beauty in Balram's impoverished ancestral village. The fort is a grand old building on a hill above town, constructed by foreign occupiers years ago, which both fascinated and frightened Balram throughout his youth. He claims that his ability to appreciate its beauty marked him early on as different from his fellow villagers and showed his destiny not to remain a slave. When he returns to the village years later with his wealthy master Mr. Ashok and his mistress Pinky Madam, he finally gets the courage to visit the fort alone. From the very top, he looks down on Laxmangahr and spits—he has literally risen above the **Rooster Coop**, and from within this fort representing the power of former occupiers, he rejects his former life and his family that still lives that life. A short time later, he murders Ashok.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Free Press edition of *The White Tiger* published in 2008.

Chapter 1: The First Night Quotes

"The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. But pay attention, Mr. Premier! Fully formed fellows, after twelve years of school and three years of university, wear nice suits, join companies, and take orders from other men for he rest of their lives. Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8-9

Explanation and Analysis

As Balram begins to recount his personal narrative, he notes that he did not receive a formal education. He defends this experience by pointing out that it actually served him advantageously.

This passage marks the first point during which Balram seeks to recast his undesirable social position as instead a superior one. The term "half-baked" will reappear throughout the novel: Here it first might seem to be a negative descriptor, for it refers to someone who is only partially educated and thus not fully formed. Balram,

however, asks the reader to ignore those preconceptions with the exhortation to Mr. Premier to "pay attention": to read more closely the specific narrative instead of approaching it with assumptions about what makes someone successful.

The unexpected advantages of a "half-baked fellow" stem, for Balram, from adaptability and lack of conformity. He sees those who are "fully formed" as being monotonous and incapable of critical thought, because they have been conditioned from their schooling to "take orders" and thus to exist within the hierarchy. Balram's rhetorical move is to equate "half-baked" with "entrepreneur," thus taking qualities that most would consider to be a fault and cast them as the very qualities that have allowed him to succeed. The novel becomes, then, not only the story of Balram's life but also an attempt to redeem a class and type of person.

"You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation?"
"The white tiger."
"That's what you are, in *this* jungle."

Related Characters: The Inspector (speaker), Balram Halwai

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

While describing his flawed education, Balram recounts a pivotal moment in which he is promised a scholarship. His teacher called him a "white tiger," an image that he will adopt throughout the novel.

The white tiger stands, here, for both Balram's faculties and his moral integrity. Between the descriptors of "intelligent" and "vivacious"—which speak only to talent—the teacher uses the most pivotal one: "honest." Myriad references are made to the unscrupulous natures of other characters throughout the novel—the "thugs and idiots"—and thus Balram's character is particularly unique because he maintains a moral compass. Indeed, the teacher argues that this is such a unique behavior that it "comes along only once in a generation." This singularly ethical nature in Balram gives him grounds to receive the scholarship from the teacher and seems to set him apart from society.

Although this memory might seem very promising for Balram, the text's use of animal imagery foreshadows how the protagonist will continue to be entrapped by social forces. The teacher may affirm that Balram is a white tiger, but he qualifies it with the phrase "in this jungle," drawing attention to the wild and brutal environment in which Balram finds himself. Indeed, the promise of a scholarship will end unfulfilled due to the cruelty of the "animal" crime lords (The Stork, etc) who control his town. Thus even as the white tiger image marks Balram for his singularity of purpose and integrity, it also confirms that he must navigate and fight his way through a cruel, antagonistic environment in order to succeed.

"They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world."

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

While describing the Black Fort, Balram observes that he has a unique capacity to see what is beautiful in the world. He believes that this quality sets him apart from others.

This passage shows that Balram's model of the world divides people into two types: Certain people are "slaves" and trapped in their narrow position, while others are emancipated entrepreneurs like Balram. We might expect these differences to be based on social or economic status, but Balram sees them to be a matter of mental emancipation: more specifically, he believes it is the ability to "see what is beautiful" that allows him to think critically and creatively. Though the outcomes of this type of thinking are not yet evident, Balram will come to use this concept – aestheticism, or the ability to see beauty – as a way to categorize and make sense of his other experiences and talents. To see the Black Fort as beautiful signifies, then, not just the ability to regard something as aesthetic from a distance—but to more broadly find significance in the world. It is this earnest belief in the meaning of the world that will motivate Balram to pursue his goals.

Chapter 2: The Second Night Quotes

"Many of my best ideas are, in fact, borrowed from my ex-employer or his brother or someone else whom I was driving about. (I confess, Mr. Premier: I am not an original thinker—but I am an original *listener*.)"

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Mr. Ashok

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

After describing his murder of Ashok at the end of the previous chapter, Balram begins this chapter by stating that he still feels a sense of fondness to his ex-employer. He also explains that many of his entrepreneurial conceits came from Ashok and that this borrowing technique is characteristic of what has allowed him to succeed.

This passage upends the preconception that entrepreneurial success is the result of entirely innovative ideas that are conceived of by a single creator. Instead of seeing the entrepreneur as a solitary genius, Balram believes that real talent lies in listening. Indeed, that one can be "an original listener" implies that listening is not a universal and passive process but rather something that can be done more or less attentively—and in a variety of different ways. The very definition of originality is thus reimagined here, with Balram seeing entrepreneurial brilliance to be a matter of recombining and manifesting the ideas of others.

The ethics of Balram's behaviors here become increasingly murky. Having already admitted to murder, he now divulges that he has often stolen the intellectual property of others—even of the man that he has killed. Yet Balram does not find this behavior problematic, instead seeing in it further proof of his entrepreneurial brilliance and originality. Thus this passage shows that his moral compass is based on achieving success – financial might, worldly power – rather than personal respect or fairness: For Balram the ability to correctly execute an idea is itself moral. A white tiger, after all, doesn't question itself for killing itself prey.

"Stories of rottenness and corruption are always the best stories, aren't they?"

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

Balram recounts bringing his father to a hospital across the river from Laxmangahr at which there are no doctors. When a patient explains that the lack stems from the hospital's corruption, Balram observes the way other people nearby are are interested to listen in to this despicable story.

This passage points out here the odd paradox in which negative, rather than positive, stories compel an audience. One might expect that these hospital-goers are looking for compassion or hope but instead they are drawn to a tale of "corruption" that only further explains the reasons for their lack of hope. Balram makes this comment even during the emotionally awful moment of his father's death, an occasion that presumably should cause him to be upset and to find the story despicable. But instead, with his entrepreneurial observational skills, he zooms out to watch his own and others' actions. Balram finds an abstract significance in this scene—and he learns that these awful tales are actually *more* attractive to an audience.

Once more, Balram returns to the importance of aesthetics: Just as he said that his ability to notice the beauty of Black Fort signaled his lack of enslavement, Balram believes that the aesthetic quality of "the best stories" redeems their "rottenness and corruption." After all, the events being recounted by Balram should, by all accounts, be morally despicable to both protagonist and reader—and yet they are deeply enjoyable to both recount and read. The novel thus theorizes its own process of storytelling, in which the reader's moral compass is seduced and shifted based on the appeal of Balram's narrative.

"That's the one good thing I'll say for myself. I've always been a big believer in education—especially my own."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Balram begins working for a teashop in Dhanbad and recalls his earlier work at a similar locale in Laxmanghar. He would rarely pay attention to his tasks but rather focus on listening

to the conversations—a process he believes aided him with his education.

This passage clarifies the type of education that Balram finds important for an entrepreneur. Instead of succeeding in a formal schooling environment, he assimilates a broad swath of information from various customers at the tea shop. As a result, following instructions in his workplace is deemed unnecessary just as with any type of formal education. Once more, Balram here bucks socially-accepted notions of success in order to defend his unconventional behavior.

That Balram sees his belief in education as "the one good thing I'll say for myself" indicates that he thinks of himself as a morally culpable person, as someone who has made unscrupulous decisions and therefore one for whom not much could be said. That he is a "believer in education" seems to mark him as more ethical, as this is a laudable perspective to hold; yet when he qualifies this point with "especially my own," Balram reaffirms his more selfish nature. His interest is ultimately not in the abstract principle of education but rather in how education serves as a means to achieve his own ends.

"See, this country, in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo... the day the British left—the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

When Balram petitions a driving instructor for lessons, his request is received with skepticism due to his low social caste. This event moves him to describe the shifting social structures in India before and after the British empire.

Once more, Balram uses an extended animal metaphor in order to explain the way that people interact. In this analogy, the older India was a "zoo" because it was rigorously structured by the caste system: Each person (i.e. animal) was allotted a certain position based on his birth—and had little to no hope of ever changing that position. Yet after the British departed, Balram contends, the zoo transformed into a jungle. That is to say, extreme mobility was suddenly possible (as was the "animals" eating each other). In this way, the transformation to jungle law allows a white tiger like Balram to, regardless of caste position, rise to success.

Yet while this passage might present the shift from zoo to jungle as largely positive, Balram's precise position on the matter remains unclear. "Jungle law" undergirds his ability to be an entrepreneur, but it is also deeply violent, as evidenced by his description of "attacked and ripped each other apart." Similarly, the quick reference to India's "days of greatness" implies that the country was more successful when it was more like a zoo—stricter and more beholden to caste. Balram thus holds an ambivalent perspective on the changing nature of Indian society—seeing both desirable mobility and undesirable unrest in the changes.

"To sum up—in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Balram continues to describe the changing caste system before and after British rule. He specifies that it has become far simpler: split into a binary division between the ambitious and unambitious instead of a multi-faceted caste system.

This passage partially obscures Balram's precise perspective on the changing nature of Indian society until you think through it more carefully. Though the variegated nature of the "old days" might seem desirable due to the way it encompassed a range of lives and destinies, this old system would also have locked each person into the destiny in which they were born. Balram might describe the "two castes" of contemporary India with a certain bluntness, but the reader must remember that it is this exact reduction that will allow him to succeed in his endeavors. By reducing the system to just those with "Big Bellies" and "Small Bellies," Balram makes ambition and wealth the only socially-meaningful factors. As a result, all animals can enter into the metaphorical jungle battle and can potentially rise to the top of society. Indeed, destiny is no longer a pre-assigned specified life but rather dependent on one's

individual ability to "eat—or get eaten up." Simplicity, in this case, actually affords Balram greater entrepreneurial capacity, for he is bounded just by this one rule.

"I absorbed everything—that's the amazing thing about entrepreneurs. We are like sponges—we absorb and grow."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Now a driver for the Stork's family, Balram often finds himself in situations in which he can eavesdrop on political discussions. For instance while massaging the Stork, Balram observes that he can assimilate information and expand his entrepreneurial talents.

This passage reiterates the importance of listening to Balram's model of the entrepreneur. His education here, as in the tea shop, is not a matter of acquiring formal knowledge but rather of engaging with the content available to him at all times. Seeing the entrepreneurs as a class of "sponges" reiterates that they need not be brilliant innovators or actively ferocious, but rather cautious and patient—taking advantage of all the nutrients surrounding them. That this will cause Balram to "grow" implies that it is part of his transformation from a small-bellied into a large-bellied man, for he expands by assimilating the ideas of those who have already succeeded.

Balram also uses this image to cast moments that would otherwise seem negative or subservient as instead quite positive. Though giving a foot massage would normally be a demeaning act, this activity is presented by Balram as quite desirable for him—because, by patiently performing this labor he is able to learn much more and better himself in ways than he otherwise could. Thus not only does the entrepreneurial mindset allow Balram to gain knowledge; it also lets him define his life in more favorable terms, to see present indignity as part of the hard work that will pay off in the end.

"The Devil, according to the Muslims, was once God's sidekick, until he fought with Him and went freelance."

10001

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Furious with his family, Balram spits on Laxmangahr to renounce his upbringing and place in the world. He connects the action to the way that the Devil rejected God.

By likening himself to the Devil, Balram firmly denies the social and ethical systems that restrict his entrepreneurial exploits. He believes, more than ever, that he should not be restricted by India's caste-based system; and he equates God with the socially-entrapping forces that he experiences by having been placed into his own particular "caste destiny." Balram's use of casual language like "sidekick" and "freelance" trivializes the theological event of Lucifer's rebellion against God, casting the devil not as an angel who rebelled against a defined celestial order but rather as a business underling who struck out on his own—implying that Balram could change his own destiny just as easily as one might go "freelance."

Yet while Balram may casually equate business and religion, the symbolism of the Devil and God should not be taken lightly. While Balram may often be anachronistic and violent, he also often reveals a more spiritual and respectful personality. Likening himself to the devil, then, is a a moral choice with which he will struggle throughout the novel. Balram thus shows himself to be caught between ethical poles: On the one hand, he wants to maintain a respectful, moral, and spiritual nature—while at the same time doing so would force him to abandon his quest to achieve wealth and social ascendence.

Chapter 4: The Fourth Night Quotes

"We're driving past Ghandi, after just having given a bribe to a minister. It's a *fucking joke*, isn't it."

Related Characters: Mr. Ashok (speaker), Pinky Madam

Related Themes:

Page Number: 115

Explanation and Analysis

Ashok makes this comment after a day of being chauffeured by Balram around Delhi. He is horrified of the irony of passing a famous Ghandi statue after a day spent buying off officials.

This line speaks to the deeply paradoxical nature of Delhi

society: Though on the outside it may be covered in monuments that affirm moral integrity, on the inside it is a morass of political corruption. Thus what Gandhi, who is considered the father of the Indian state, stands for is not only being ignored, but also actively betrayed under the nose of his very statue. Ashok's frustration is motivated in part by a historical critique—on the inability of India to follow Ghandi's moral principles—and in part by disgust at the mere thought of what his family has done.

Yet if Ashok's comment casts him as deeply corrupt, the very fact that he speaks this line reveals a more ethical disposition. Certainly, many characters engage in similar behaviors, but few like Ashok hold themselves accountable for these behaviors—or even see them to be negative. But by noting the symbolic mismatch of the Ghandi statue and the day's acts, Ashkok reveals a capacity to notice these behaviors—and to find them lacking. Thus he, like Balram, is both a witness and agent of corruption: partially redeemed for their observational powers but also condemned for perpetuating the broken system.

Ashok's moral concerns also mark him in two other ways: first, they make him a more sympathetic character, so Balram's eventual murder of him is thus harder to justify. Second, though, in the context of the "jungle" of Indian portrayed in the novel, they mark him as weak, as someone who might be murder-able.

"We were like two separate cities—inside and outside the dark egg. I knew I was in the right city. But my father, if he were alive, would be sitting on that pavement... So I was in some way out of the car too, even while I was driving it."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Vikram Halwai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

Balram describes the experiences of driving Ashkok around Delhi and observing those outside of the car. He notes that he has more power than those on the street but also that his actual social position is hardly any better.

To explain how separate his existence is from those on the street, Balram uses the image of two cities. This metaphor implies that there are two overlapping cities in the same physical space—thus pointing to how varied of an experience two populations can have in it. The "dark egg" of the car divides the two, presenting Ashok and Balram's city as womb-like and protected, while that of the street represents a far harsher reality. This image emphasizes, then, the scale of the social divide in Delhi, in particular as it pertains to who has access to transportation.

At the same time, the comment is deeply personal: Balram notes that his place is not fully in the car and that he metaphorically straddles the two cities. In particular, the reference to his father shows the continued effect that family heritage has on his psyche: Though he has previously renounced his family, Balram evidently believes that their place outside the dark egg causes him to be "in some way out of the car too." Balram is thus tasked tasked with navigating these two simultaneous cities—a burden that will also serve as an entrepreneurial opportunity.

Chapter 5: The Fifth Night Quotes

"The greatest thing to come out of this country... is the Rooster Coop. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers...They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Balram explains why he was blamed for his master's crime by introducing the image of the Rooster Coop. He uses this metaphor repeatedly throughout the novel to describe the way that lower classes are trapped by those in power.

The Rooster Coop, Balram explains, is not just a normal means of social entrapment. It functions not only by containing its prisoners, but also by inspiring a paralyzing fear in them. Transparency allows still-alive roosters to "smell the blood" and "see the organs"; they are presented with stories and images of other roosters being punished. Therefore, the roosters are left feeling deeply scared and unwilling to resist, for they do not want to be similarly punished.

The way that Balram introduces the Rooster Coop is worth examining. That the Rooster Coop is "the greatest thing to

come out of this country" presents the image ironically, as a successful cultural product. This sardonic language emphasizes first its potency—it is the "greatest" because it is effective—and second the way Balram sees his country to be deeply disappointing. The Coop, we should note, stands for the opposite of Balram's entrepreneurial ideals: It discourages risk and maintains the status quo. It is a creation that prevents other creation.

"... But where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began, I could not tell: no servant can ever tell what the motives of his heart are... We are made mysteries to ourselves by the Rooster Coop we are locked in."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Mr. Ashok

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

While caring for Ashok in the wake of Pinky Madam's departure, Balram finds himself growing fond of his master. But he also questions his own motives for such feelings, noting that the social structure prevents him from correctly ascertaining his feelings.

Balram shows himself, here, to be deeply skeptical of his own emotional responses. He rejects the idea of his "genuine concern," observing that it may just be "self-interest": It would behoove him to feel compassionate toward Ashok and to treat him with more care, because Ashok might in turn reward or protect him. This is a textbook examples of the Rooster Coop because instead of rebelling, Balram has actually found himself caring about the very man who helps keep him encaged. Thus Balram indicates that Indian society both subdues revolutionary impulses *and* forms odd emotional connections between servants and masters.

Although this comment pertains to a specific relationship and specific culture, it also makes a poignant statement on the broader functioning of human emotions. Each society, after all, has some form of a Rooster Coop: a social system that divides people into different strata and creates an incentive system for members of certain strata to behave in specified ways toward others. Balram's claim that "we are made mysteries to ourselves" in such a setup indicates that human identity itself is shaped and occluded by any such hierarchy—for the individual's emotions cannot be separated from the desires dictated by the Coop.

"The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs. Yes, that's the sad truth, Mr. Premier. The coop is guarded from the inside."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Wen Jiabao, Vitiligo-Lips

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

Kusum Granny sends Balram a letter encouraging him to marry. While he is tempted, Balram eventually decides this choice will entrap him: He sees his family as a set of obstacles that are part of the Rooster Coop.

This passage adds an additional facet to the entrapping-mechanism of the Coop: the way roosters in the Coop prevent others from escaping. Previously Balram has described the way other servants from Ashok's family have sought to halt his goals. Here it is not only unknown servants but also family members that play this role—for Balram repeatedly finds himself torn between pursuing his entrepreneurial exploits and following the wishes of Kusum Granny. Balram thus justifies his rejection of his family and of any affiliation with other servants based on the idea that they will keep him within the Coop.

Though this dynamic might imply that the roosters fight each other in order to escape the cage, Balram's language explicitly resists that interpretation. His use of the passive voice in the phrases "Rooster Coop was doing"and "is guarded" indicates that these actions are not actively chosen by the roosters but rather stem from the entrapping social system. Indeed, the servants are not battling for a select few spots as "innovators, experiments, or entrepreneurs" but simply preventing anyone from gaining that power. They thus function as a self-encasing guard cohort that has adopted the logic of the cage owners.

Chapter 6: The Sixth Morning Quotes

"The rest of today's narrative will deal mainly with the sorrowful tale of how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness, All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Mr. Ashok

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of Chapter 6, Balram prepares the reader for the direction of the story to come. He explains that he followed and mimicked Ashok's newly perverted behaviors.

This passage marks a decisive shift in the tone and trajectory of Balram's story. Whereas he has previously considered the tale to mark his self-improvement from ignorance to knowledge, Balram here inverts its direction: from laudable innocence to "wickedness." For the first time, the reader has a sense that Balram looks retrospectively at his life with a sense of guilt, instead of simply believing that his choices were uniformly positive.

Despite this note of self-criticism, however, Balram continues to offload the full extent of his moral responsibility. When he says, "All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok," Balram presents his behaviors to be the result of mimicking his master, just as he hadpreviously in the novel. Thus, he is not in fact taking a new stance on the world, but rather applying the same entrepreneurial techniques to an undesirable subject.

Furthermore, the way that he describes his transformation from "village fool" to "citified fellow" portrays the change in him not as dependent on his own character but rather on the environment in which he finds himself. So even as Balram seems to take moral responsibility, he also continues to offload that culpability onto external factors.

Chapter 7: The Sixth Night Quotes

"The city knew my secret... Even the road—the smooth, polished road of Delhi that is the finest in all of India—knew my secret."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Having begun to fantasize about stealing the red bag of money, Balram becomes increasingly paranoid. He thinks that others on the street know of his intentions.

This passage shows how Balram has begun to think of himself in increasingly judgmental terms. He no longer considers himself to be superior to the others in the city and instead fixates on his "secret." Indeed, he projects this guilty conscience on those around him, imagining that others see him as equally culpable. Anthropomorphizing the road only serves to reiterate the extent of this paranoia—for it assumes that the physical infrastructure of the city itself is tracking Balram's every move and thought. This passage, then, speaks less to the actual conditions of Delhi and more to the manic psychological state in which Balram has found himself: ambivalent and already guilty about the crime he is about to commit.

"You were looking for the key for years/ But the door was always open!"

Related Characters: Muslim Bookseller (speaker), Balram Halwai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Balram wanders through Delhi with the bribe money from Ashok. While doing so, he hears these lines from a poem spoken by a Muslim bookseller.

These unexpected phrases help provide Balram with the confidence he requires in order to commit the pivotal crime of the novel. He interprets them to mean that the "door" to personal and social improvement need not be opened with a mystical key—which would stand for a singular entrepreneurial idea—but simply requires him to have the courage to access the already-available options. The striking pertinence of this comment to Balram's current situation presents the events-to-come as fated. But we could also interpret the connection as further evidence of his paranoid mindset: one that links even anecdotal and unrelated comments to his own life.

The line of poetry also offers a very different model of Indian society than that put forward previously by Balram. Whereas earlier descriptions of the Coop have repeatedly stressed the restrictive nature of Indian society, this passage does just the opposite: it implies that there are in fact *no* restrictions and that anyone is free to move between doors with complete ease. Once more, Balram presents his success as less the result of a genius idea and more from his ability to observe and act on social patterns.

"Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That's my whole philosophy in a sentence."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

While at the zoo, Balram returns to contemplate his metaphorical connection between humans and animals. Here he revises his earlier beliefs and pronounces his essential worldview.

Whereas before Balram would constantly equate humans and animals, here he sharply differentiates between the two. Animals that are in the zoo thus should be treated with certain restrictions, whereas humans should be entirely free. Balram implies that each species has a natural way of living that should be manifested correctly; and when social forces prevent that from happening, then something is at odds with his philosophy. Though this seems to be a fairly self-evident proposition, it bears recalling just how prevalent animal and cage imagery has been in the text. This sentence is therefore far more than a simple comment that humans should be treated well. It is also a rejection of the very symbolism Balram has spent the novel up to this point developing: his new philosophy implies that what he was doing before was incorrect—for it implicitly linked humans to animals in an ultimately demeaning and restrictive way. Of course, this new philosophy also gives Balram license to be free in the sense of doing whatever he wants without restriction, including murdering Ashok to take the bribe money for himself.

"We went from bank to bank, and the weight of the red bag grew. I felt its pressure increase on my lower back—as if I were taking Mr. Ashok and his bag not in a car, but the way my father would take a customer and his bag—in a rickshaw."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Vikram Halwai, Mr. Ashok

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

Ashok prepares for an enormous bribe, so Balram must shuttle him over Delhi withdrawing money.

This passage is a characteristic example of how Balram's imaginative thinking takes a metaphorical idea and renders it literal. Of course, the physical weight of the bag is not actually sufficient to weigh him down, but Balram feels that it is symbolically doing so. That he feels a "pressure increase" speaks to a double moral burden: one Balram feels for supporting Ashok in the first place and one for the murder he is planning to imminently commit.

And, intriguingly, this burden causes Balram to think back on his father's parallel experience as a rickshaw driver. The memory links Balram to his familial past, as it is true that just as his father once drove people around, he is doing the same thing now. This is a reminder that he is still just as caught in the Rooster Coop as his father ever was, that he is still just as trapped in that inferior social position, and it therefore serves as a final spur to make him determined to commit the murder that will allow him to escape the Rooster Coop.

Chapter 8: The Seventh Night Quotes

"Now, despite my amazing success story, I don't want to lose contact with the place where I got my real education in life. The road and the pavement."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

After murdering Ashok and absconding with the bribe money, Balram moves to Bangalore and uses the money to become a successful business entrepreneur. But he reminds the reader that he stays connected to average people and patterns in the city.

This passage preempts a judgement that many readers would make of Balram's character: that once he has succeeded in his endeavors, he would abandon the lower social caste of his past and assimilate fully into the lives of

the large-bellied men. Instead, Balram explains, he continues to adhere to the unconventional "real education" that allowed him to succeed in the first place: the "original listening" to the ideas of others on the street. Indeed, it was both the metaphorical and literal pavement that gave Balram the idea for his business, ultimately affirming the success of his technique. If earlier Balram sought to turn the drawback of being "half-baked" into a desirable quality, here he reconfirms those benefits—by expressing a continued adherence even once he has succeeded.

At the same time, Balram's concern that the reader might judge him for whether or not he would abandon the streets, when he has just described how he achieved business success through murder and theft, seems more than a little misplaced! Through the dissonance of what Balram thinks would concern us as readers and what more likely does offers, Adiga, the novelist, space to critique the Indian society that has produced Balram. As portrayed by Adiga, it is a place so focused on success and its achievement that little things like murder don't even really fit into Balram's moral calculus. Balram remains irrepressible and attractive as a character to the end of the novel. But the India that created Balram is, at the same time, witheringly critiqued by the novel.

> The city has its share of thugs and politicians. It's just that here, if a man wants to be good, he can be good. In Laxmangarh, he doesn't even have this choice. This is the difference between this India and that India; the choice."

Related Characters: Muslim Bookseller (speaker), Balram Halwai

Related Themes:

Page Number: 262

Explanation and Analysis

After one of his drivers kills a young boy, Balram visits the family to offer his condolences and financial compensation. He extrapolates this moment to offer a broader comment on different sub-societies in India.

The difference between Laxmangarh and Bangalore, for Balram, is that the first forestalls individual agency and social mobility. As such, one "doesn't even have this choice" to act morally or not. This distinction speaks both to Balram's entrepreneurial success as well as to the shifting social conditions in Indian society—which are slowly loosening the strictness of the Rooster Coop that previously dominated "that India." A man "can be good" in Bangalore precisely because so many restrictions have been eased, because he has the freedom to also choose not to be good. (Remeber that earlier in the novel Balram compared himself to the devil who rebelled against God, who, Balram might say, chose free will rather than enforced goodness.)

This passage also helps to clarify the reason that Balram sees himself to be a relatively ethical person. Although the average reader might consider his actions to be no less corrupt than those of the previous animal overlords, Balram contends that there is a clear shift. That shift does not stem so much from the way he does business—he continues to bribe officials and avoid guilt—but from the awareness he holds of the flawed nature of his actions.

> "There is no end to things in India, Mr. Jiabao, as Mr. Ashok so correctly used to say. You'll have to keep paying and paying the fuckers. But I complain about the police the way the rich complain; not the way the poor complain."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Mr. Ashok, Wen Jiabao

Related Themes:

Page Number: 266

Explanation and Analysis

Balram continues to explore the murky ethics of his new profession. He explains that he remains entrapped in the socially corrupt system despite his success.

Lest the reader believe that Balram's entrepreneurial exploits have allowed him to fully transcend Indian society, our narrator assures us that corruption still predominates. That "there is no end to things in India" implies that his single success has not led to a full-fledged revolution: He cannot overthrow a complete social system but rather must continue to operate within its confines. "The fuckers" may have changed names for Balram, but the process of "paying and paying" continues. His newfound success does not change that fundamental system but only his relationship to it—complaining as "the rich complain."

Balram's point here also helps explain away his continued corrupt actions: the reader might expect a utopian ending in which he acts with perfect morality and without regard for the corrupt Indian government. But Balram instead justifies his behaviors by pointing out that even the white tiger is

beholden to his society, and that, given that no one can escape the world, it's better to be a rich person in it than a poor person in it.

"Yet...even if they throw me in jail...Ill say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hours, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant. I think I am ready to have children, Mr. Premier."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker), Wen Jiabao

Related Themes:

Page Number: 276

Explanation and Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, Balram considers the fact that he may be caught for his murder. He continues to defend his choice, observing that even if he were punished, his moment of freedom would alone justify the punishment.

That living freely "just for a minute" would make worthwhile being thrown in jail speaks to the high value that Balram attributes to his freedom. Intriguingly, the value he attributes to freedom derives less from the experience of being free and rather from the knowledge that he is free: the mere awareness of what it feels like "not to be a servant." Balram thus raises his individual liberty above all other values and experiences, defining it to be his singular and central goal in life.

The reference to having children is far less straightforward. Recall that Balram was previously attracted to marriage and to family life but believed that it would distract him from his goals. Similarly, we have seen that the family is a critical component of the Rooster Coop, which obstructs social mobility. Thus Balram's feeling that he is "ready" for children might indicate that his success has sufficiently guarded him from those threats: He can have children because he has already emancipated himself (and his future children) from familial entrapment. At the same time, that Balram would see himself as ready for children only after achieving business success founded on murder and theft serves once more as a condemnation of the Indian society in which he lives, that much make such a sentiment logical.

"People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else...That will never happen. Every man must make his own Benaras. The book of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly, young Indian. Crap it out, and read."

Related Characters: Balram Halwai (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 261

Explanation and Analysis

Balram's final statements return to a broad condemnation of Indian society. He challenges others to be less passive and to recognize that they are capable of revolutionary activity if they simply take an active stand.

This passage references and rejects a common Marxist rhetoric of revolution. In particular, Balram calls on common people to rise up against their oppressors instead of passively accepting their lot in life. His issue with "people in this country" is that they believe someone else will induce a massive society shift when in fact such a change will only ever arise from individual action. Consider, after all, the derision Balram directed toward the Great Socialist's party, which offers a false form of that exact revolution.

Balram also here references actual spiritual and political movements, but only to undermine them and to argue that such institutions will fail to bring about real change. "Benares" is another name for Varanasi, the spiritual capital of India and the site of many pilgrimages. A single "book of your revolution" recalls a text like the Communist Manifest from Marx. But Balram believes that the redemption one seeks in Varanasi is created internally and that a revolution's manifest "sits in the pit of your belly": it is a result of individual ambition—even avarice—and it is deeply personal. Thus Balram closes the novel by extrapolating his own anecdotal story to offer a model of how others in Indian society could succeed: Not by following a singular or ideological model but by crafting (crapping) their own individual revolutions.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST NIGHT

Indian entrepreneur Balram Halwai (alias Ashok Sharma), the novel's narrator and protagonist, begins composing a letter to Chinese official Wen Jiabao, who is visiting India on diplomacy. Balram expresses his excitement as a local businessman that Jiabao wants to understand the culture of Indian entrepreneurship, and claims that his life story is all Jiabao needs to hear in order to learn "the truth about India." He warns Jiabao not to believe what politicians tell him, and not to buy the bootlegged American business books that children sell in the street.

Balram's choice to tell his life story to an important Chinese politician reflects his great social ambition, as well as his admiration for rank and power. It also agrees with his beliefs about education, especially the idea that life experience and immersion in a city or society is more illuminating than traditional learning. This also explains why he holds up his own story as something to be learned from and cautions against trusting business books and reports from politicians.

To set the scene for Jiabao, Balram describes the luxurious Bangalore office from which he writes, and explains that he will stay up all night to tell his story. This is no great hardship considering that all successful entrepreneurs must watch over their businesses night and day. He honors the Indian tradition of praying to the Gods before beginning a story, an act that he irreverently refers to as "Kissing the Gods' arses," before starting his narrative.

Balram's luxurious office embodies urban, sophisticated "Light India." His decision to begin his narrative with a prayer to the Gods implies that despite his skepticism about religion, its traditions and rituals still have a hold over him: he is "both mocking and believing" at the same time.

Balram refers to himself as a "half-baked Indian" because he was prevented from completing his formal education as a child. However, he claims that this lack of schooling was not necessarily a disadvantage, and that all Indian entrepreneurs are similarly "half-baked." "Fully formed" Indians, on the other hand, go on to work in companies and have no entrepreneurial spirit.

"Half-baked Indians" lack the benefit of formal schooling. However, the need to take charge of one's own education and to continue learning from one's environment, often in unconventional ways, produces people with flexible, inventive minds well suited to entrepreneurship.

To describe his physical appearance and basic biographical details, Balram references a police poster that was issued for his arrest three years ago after an event that he describes as "an act of entrepreneurship." He mocks the hazy, incomplete police report and fills in the missing information as he goes along. He particularly notes his outward transformation from the unfed peasant in the poster to the pudgy businessman he is today. He also mentions that as a child, he was simply called "Munna" or "boy," until a schoolteacher assigned him the name "Balram"—the name of the god Krishna's sidekick.

Balram's reference to his crime as an entrepreneurial act reveals his attitude towards the term: an entrepreneur, to him, is anyone with the courage to break free of poverty and injustice in Indian society, no matter what means they use to do so. The fact that he does not resemble the boy pictured in the poster reflects his ability, as a self-made man, to change his identity completely, and also hints at how wealth transforms his body from thin and malnourished to pudgy and well-fed. Balram has truly crossed from Dark India into the Light, and is now incapable of being caught, as he is too rich and powerful for something like an arrest warrant to touch him.

Balram goes on to describe his native village of Laxmangahr, in the poor, rural "India of Darkness," in contrast to his current city of Bangalore, which he says is part of the urban, prosperous "India of Light." Laxmangahr sits on the banks of the sacred Ganges River, where religious Hindus have cremated their dead for centuries and where Balram's own mother was cremated when he was a young boy. He describes the traumatic experience of her funeral, how he was frightened not so much by the cremation but by the black river mud that sucked his mother's ashes into its depths. Watching her sink into the earth, Balram faints from an overwhelming sense of oppression and futility. Despite its importance as a sacred site, he never returns.

Though the Ganges is a sacred site and tourist destination, for Balram it represents the ignorance and poverty in which he grew up. The Darkness is a world apart from Light India, which ignores the enormous need of the people in the Darkness while romanticizing India's holy history. The grand rites at his mother's funeral only communicate to Balram the misery of her life. The Ganges mud that consumes his mother's body reminds him of his own hopeless situation and how hard it will be to break free of his lowly station in life.

Throughout his youth Balram is surrounded by poverty, disease, and malnutrition. His destitute family lives at the mercy of four cruel and exploitative landlords referred to collectively as "The Animals," individually as The Water Buffalo, The Raven, The Stork and the Wild Boar. The Animals "feed" on the town, harassing women and taxing the villagers at every opportunity. "

The landlords' animal names reflect Balram's description of modern India, which is liberated from the old caste system but has turned into a jungle: people either eat or get eaten. Without the roles prescribed by caste, one either rises to extreme wealth and preys on others or sinks into extreme poverty and is preyed upon.

Balram's father Vikram Halwai scrapes together a living as a rickshaw driver. His one ambition is to see his son complete his education and "live like a man." Balram's only understanding of what this might mean is based on his awe for Vijay the Bus Driver, who began as a pig farmer's son but somehow works his way to a stable job, not to mention a fancy uniform and shiny silver whistle that all the young boys admire. Rumor has it that Vijay got his jobs in exchange for having sex with a politician, but this does not trouble Balram.

Vijay was born at the bottom of the social ladder, but manages to move up in the world. Balram looks up to any Indian capable of escaping inequality and poverty as an entrepreneur, even if escape comes at a moral cost. Balram sees Vijay as someone to emulate.

Balram's school, though underfunded and run by a corrupt teacher who steals funds because he himself has not been paid for months, is a place where he excels. He recounts a pivotal moment in his life when a visiting school inspector singles him out for his academic promise and integrity. The man calls Balram a "**White Tiger**," the rarest and most noble animal in the jungle, and promises him a scholarship. Balram, used to a life of hardship in the Darkness, knows that this promise is too good to come true.

While Balram evolves into a ruthless, cynical, and criminal character, it is important to remember that as a boy he was praised for academic promise and integrity, for being as noble and intelligent as a white tiger. His continued attachment to this sense of himself as a white tiger – as someone uniquely special – reflects the combined impact of his incomplete formal education and his brutal life experience on his identity. It will also justify, at least to himself, all his future actions.

His intuition proves correct. Balram's grandmother Kusum takes out a loan from the Stork, one of the four village landlords, to pay for a relative's wedding. The Stork orders that Balram be taken out of school to work alongside the rest of his family and pay back the debt. Balram goes to work with his brother Kishan in the village teashop. Though this is a devastating turn of fate, Balram claims that his entrepreneurial spirit allows him to take matters into his own hands, to turn this bad news into good news.

This episode is an example of what Balram will come to call the Rooster Coop in action, with the poor furthering their own oppression through short-term thinking and familial obligation, while the powerful reap the benefits. Rather than protect Balram's best interests, Kusum compromises his future. However, Balram also shows his first entrepreneurial tendencies in his resolve to turn drudgery into opportunity.

Balram ends this first installment of his story with a memory of **the Black Fort**: the only thing of beauty in his impoverished town. The fort is a grand old building on a hill above town, constructed by foreign occupiers years ago, which both fascinated and frightened Balram throughout his youth. He claims that his ability to appreciate its beauty marked him early on as different from his fellow villagers, destined not to remain a slave. When he returns to the village years later with his wealthy master Mr. Ashok and his mistress Pinky Madam, he finally gets the courage to visit the fort alone. He looks out over the village from on high and spits. Eight months later, he reveals, he slits the throat of Mr. Ashok.

Balram believes his interest in the Black Fort to be a sign that he was by nature destined to overcome his deprived background. This belief provides insight into his understanding of himself as a white tiger: someone who is inherently superior, who deserves to be at the top and so is justified in attaining the top by whatever means necessary, and is therefore exempt from certain moral laws. His courage to climb up to the fort with its view over Laxmangahr indicates that he has escaped the psychology and fear that keeps the residents of the Darkness oppressed. He looks out over his boyhood town; he understands the system of oppression, and by spitting he shows both his scorn for this corrupt system and for those who can't rise above it, and his choice to cut himself free of it. And in his final line he reveals the means by which he rises above, the "entrepreneurial act" that sent him on his way to becoming a successful businessman: murder. He killed to achieve wealth and power. The shock of The White Tiger *is that it appears from Balram's office and tone that the killing gained him exactly what he wanted without any repercussions.*

CHAPTER 2: THE SECOND NIGHT

Balram comments that he continues to feel a sense of loyalty and closeness to the murdered Ashok and his former wife, Pinky Madam. He attributes many of his best ideas to Ashok and his family, explaining that he learned much of what he knows about life and Indian society from listening in on their conversations. In fact, he describes himself not as an original thinker, but as an original listener. The strong bond he still feels with Ashok reflects his belief that murder is an intimate act: in a way, the murderer becomes responsible for the victim's life and knows more about him than the victim's family. Balram alone knows how Ashok's story ends.

Balram believes that the entrepreneur's education depends largely on an ability to learn as much information as possible from one's surroundings. Balram has learned a great deal from his employers' conversations, which explains why he can still feel indebted to them despite their mistreatment of him. That Balram professes to feel a bond with his victim stronger than a familial bond ties into the troubling portrayal of family ties and intimacy in the novel as a whole.

Balram first meets Ashok in the city of Dhanbad, where he moves after his father dies from tuberculosis in a run-down hospital across the river from Laxmangahr. It is the only hospital in the region, yet Kishan and Balram arrive with their father only to find that there are no doctors there. A Muslim patient at the hospital explains that corrupt physicians and government officials scheme in order to avoid staffing village hospitals. All the patients crowd together and listen to his explanation with a certain pleasure, because, as Balram remarks, "stories of rottenness and corruption are always the best." Their father dies on the floor of the hospital, never having seen a doctor.

The Muslim patient's story fascinates the hospital visitors, even though it is the story of a corrupt system that has left all of them waiting in a hospital without doctors. The patients' perverse interest in the subject of corruption reveals how totally the Rooster Coop oppresses the poor. They somehow take pleasure in hearing about the systems that keep them in permanent destitution, without access to basic health care. This is all also a pretty good joke: The White Tiger *is itself a story of "rottenness and corruption."*

After Balram's father's death, Kusum arranges Kishan's marriage to a local girl in exchange for a large dowry, and then sends both Kishan and Balram to Dhanbad to work in a teashop. Balram had worked in a teashop in Laxmangahr, but was dismissed for eavesdropping on customers and neglecting his work. Instead of scrubbing the floors like the other employees whom he calls "human spiders" because of their insect-like way of crouching and cleaning, Balram tries to learn as much as possible from tea shop customers. Seduced by the moneyed atmosphere of Dhanbad, a city grown wealthy from the coal industry, Balram tries to learn all he can about his new home by eavesdropping on miners who come to the café.

Kusum's decision to marry off Kishan when he is barely old enough to support his wife is an example of the destructive role traditional Indian families play in the novel. Instead of waiting for her grandson to mature with an eye to helping him succeed longer term, Kusum marries him off to collect the dowry in the short term. Balram, meanwhile, tries to look after his own interests by paying special attention to miners who patronize the café, where he and Kishan work, knowing that they have insight into Dhanbad's coal industry.

Balram's "original listening" pays off. After hearing a miner discuss the high salaries earned by private drivers, Balram begs his family to pay for him to take driving lessons. Kusum Granny eventually agrees, so long as Balram promises to send the family his monthly earnings once he gets a job. Balram finds a driving instructor willing to take him on, though the man is skeptical that Balram, from a caste of sweet-makers, could ever be tough enough to be a driver. Balram proves his instructor wrong, however, and the instructor teaches him not only how to drive and fix a car; he also learns several life lessons about how to stand up for himself in the "jungle" that is the open road. As a reward for finishing the training, his instructor takes Balram to lose his virginity in Dhanbad's red light district.

Even Kusum Granny's help comes with crippling obligations. The driving instructor's preconceived notions about Balram's likely abilities based on caste show how crippling the caste system could be when it existed, and how it's removal allowed individuals a degree of freedom that they didn't have before. Yet this freedom is the freedom of the "jungle" – as the novel literally describes the open road. Balram, who sees himself as a white tiger, thrives in this world, and this "life" education fits with his belief that the most important lessons a young person should learn have nothing to do with moral or intellectual reasoning, but with developing survival skills. After these lessons, he has become "a man" – as his father wished him to become – both mentally, as he's able to think his way out of trouble and into opportunity, and physically, as he's able to confront the "jungle" of the road and also because he's now had his first sexual experience. And, of course, since the India he depicts is one of a kind of hyper-capitalism, that first sexual experience is something he bought from a prostitute.

Unfortunately, Balram's instructor can't help him find a job, and so Balram strikes out to search for one on his own. He knocks on rich families' doors to offer his services as an "experienced driver," but is not rewarded for this so-called "entrepreneurial" behavior until at one house he meets Mr. Ashok. Ashok is the son of the Stork of Laxmangahr, and has recently returned to India from the United States.

Balram's decision to promote his services as a chauffeur by going door-to-door, while impressive, would normally not be termed "entrepreneurship." That he uses this word to describe his job search demonstrates how in his mind, entrepreneurship refers generally to any behavior requiring initiative, courage, and drive. Note also how this display of drive connects him almost immediately to the criminal and corrupt powers in India – the big-bellies, the eaters – and how Balram willingly joins up with a family that has preyed upon the poor of Laxmangahr (including Balram's own family).

Ashok, the Stork, and Ashok's older brother Mukesh Sir (also known as "the Mongoose"), question Balram about his caste and family background. Balram explains that his future masters ask these questions because they want to be able to locate his hometown so that they can punish his family members should he, Balram, step out of line after they hire him.

In Balram's India, it is common practice for masters to punish a servant's misdeeds by hurting the servant's family. Balram comes to believe that this is another factor that contributes to the Rooster Coop: that not only does family itself trap a person in obligations, but that threats of violence against that family further limit what an "entrepreneurial" person can actually do.

Balram convinces the Stork's family of his trustworthiness and they take him on as a driver. Life in their home is relatively comfortable. Although Balram has to share a room with the family's "number one" (i.e. first choice) driver, Ram Persad, Balram now has a roof over his head and one of the khaki uniforms he admired for so long. Though he is officially a "driver," he is at the family's general beck and call, cleaning, cooking, performing odd jobs, and even massaging the Stork's feet each night. During the massages, the Stork and his sons discuss coal, politics, and China. Balram listens intently, absorbing everything "like a sponge" as an entrepreneur should, but also because he feels himself to be part of the family and that his masters' fate will be his own.

Balram's ability to absorb bits and pieces of information from his masters' conversation, even while carrying out the humiliating task of massaging the Stork's feet, reflects his natural curiosity and intelligence. His desire to understand the family's financial circumstances shows both his drive, but also that he already feels strongly bonded to his masters, is invested in their welfare, and despite himself has an instinct to serve them.

Balram describes his relationship with Ram Persad, the family's "number one" servant. (Balram is "number two.") Though they sleep in the same room, they live in constant hatred of one another and compete in every aspect of their lives, including the number of Hindu idols they pray to. Ram Persad sleeps on a bed, while Balram sleeps on the floor. Ram Persad drives Ashok and Pinky Madam around in the luxurious Honda City, while Balram drives other members of the household in the less impressive Maruti Suzuki. The family's third servant, referred to as "the Nepali" (though his actual name is Ram Bahadur), sides with Ram Persad and enjoys tormenting Balram by making him bathe the masters' lapdogs, Cuddles and Puddles.

The hostile relationships between the household's three servants show how even those who are at the bottom of the Rooster Coop enforce its rules, rather than trying to free themselves. Instead of working together to better their quality of life, the servants engage in petty infighting in order to gain as much power over each other. They fight each other in order to get to serve in more sophisticated ways, rather than work together to be free. Even religion becomes a tool in the ongoing competition between Balram and Ram Persad, in their private show of false devotion.

Balram gets his first opportunity to drive Ashok and his wife in the Honda City when Ashok decides to visit Laxmangahr, their shared ancestral village. Balram drives the couple to lunch at the Wild Boar's house. As Ashok and Pinky visit the Wild Boar in his beautiful home, Balram visits with his own family. During lunch, Kusum nags him for neglecting to send money, while praising his success and threatening to arrange his marriage. She serves him a rich chicken dish, which only serves to emphasize how thin and malnourished Kishan has become. Enraged by his family's demands and their neglect of Kishan, Balram storms out of the house and climbs up to the **Black Fort**.

The great luxury of the Wild Boar's estate is immediately contrasted by the poverty of Balram's family. Note how Kusum continues to try to manipulate Balram, but also feels that his role of a servant is a powerful one (which also shows just how small Kusum's dreams are). For Balram, Kishan's overworked, underfed appearance is a visible representation of the exploitative demands he feels his family makes of him and his brother. Kusum is a destructive influence on her family, placing too many burdens on individual family-members and preventing them from advancing in life. Balram rejects her plans to marry him off, fearing that he will soon end up like Kishan. Remember, also, that as a child Balram was both in awe of and scared of the Black Fort. Walking up to the fort is a physical symbol of throwing off that fear.

Up near the fort, Balram looks down over Laxmangahr and spits. He compares this gesture to a poem by the Muslim poet Iqbal about God and the Devil. According to Balram, the Devil "was once God's sidekick until he fought with Him and went freelance." The Devil rejects God's offer to become His servant, just as Balram spits down on the town below him, rejecting the circumstances into which God placed him and his own family's seeming effort to lock him into an impoverished life of servitude. On the drive back to Dhanbad, however, Balram reflexively touches his finger to his eye when driving past a temple as a sign of faith and respect. His apparent devotion so impresses Pinky and Ashok that he repeats it multiple times, pretending that they have passed holy landmarks, all the way home.

Balram's behavior as he stands near the Black Fort, and in the car ride back to Dhanbad, reflects his complicated attitude towards religion. On the one hand, he sets out to defy the plans God has laid out for his life and makes light of God's influence. On the other hand, the show of respect he makes as the car passes roadside temples is so ingrained in him, he is not at first aware of doing it. Finally, the spitting as a representation of his desire to "go freelance" complicates the relationship between good and evil, God and the devil. His goal is to defy fate and experience independence, even if he has to behave immorally to do so. Anyone who seeks independence in Indian society, at least as Balram sees it, is aligned with both freedom and the Devil. Finally, in spitting at Laxmangahr, Balram is scorning both his hometown and his family, a sign that he is ready to fully part ways with both. As we know from the end of Chapter 1, eight months after this moment up at the Black Fort he kills his master. So this spitting, which symbolizes both his choice to go "freelance" and his breaking away from his past and family, is a critical moment setting him on that path.


CHAPTER 3: THE FOURTH MORNING

Balram resumes his letter to Premier Jiabao with a critique of Indian democracy, and warns him not to believe the pamphlet describing the government that he will undoubtedly receive from the Indian politicians. Balram's first experience with Indian democracy was when his employer at the teashop in Laxmangahr sold all his employees' votes to the Great Socialist's party, leaving Balram without any political voice. When the official at the local voting booth tells Balram he must be eighteen years old to vote, he agrees to register as an eighteen-year-old, effectively receiving a "birthday" from the government.

Though Balram receives his "birthday" as a result of corrupt behavior by election officials and his former employer, this episode may have helped form his understanding of his own versatility and flexible identity. He has received a series of names and a birthday at random: no wonder he feels it is possible to reinvent himself into whoever he wishes to be. Meanwhile, it is now clear that the Indian government is just as corrupt as its "businessmen."


The Great Socialists' party dominated politics in the Darkness at the time of the first election in which Balram could vote. While the Great Socialist presents himself as a populist leader favoring the poor, he and his corrupt ministers murdered, raped, embezzled funds, and rigged elections to stay in power. His hold over the region is so complete and uncontested that any citizen who thinks he can vote for himself, for or against the Great Socialist party, is considered mad.

The notion that an Indian citizen might vote for his or herself is so foreign to the poor villagers that they merely feel pity for any individual persuaded to try. They have grown to reluctantly and unquestioningly accept the Great Socialist's tyrannical rule, just as they accept the exploitation of the Four Animals.

The Great Socialist secured his power in Laxmangahr by cutting deals with the four local landlords (Stork, Raven, Wild Boar, Buffalo). In this particular voting year, however, the landlords are unhappy with the terms of their political agreement, and start their own oppositional party against the Great Socialist. Vijay, who has transformed himself from a bus driver into a political activist, outspokenly supports the Great Socialist against the new party. Finally, the two sides appear to reach an agreement, and the police arrive in town as they have during each preceding election to intimidate the townspeople and inform them, essentially, that going to the polls is useless: their votes will not be counted and the election will be tallied in favor of the Great Socialist.

The fact that the landlords have such power to influence an election's course reflects the larger state of political inequality in India. The fate of millions of poor Indians is controlled by a very small handful of wealthy individuals, who use their money to pay off local officials and protect their family fortunes. And while those elites may clash from time to time, as they do in this election at first, ultimately they work out such clashes to ensure that they remain in power over the downtrodden poor. Note also how Vijay, once a poor man himself, now that he has moved up the social ladder supports the corrupt leaders. The game is rigged such that the only way for the poor to move up is to become as corrupt as the rich, to exploit the poor who they've left behind.

Balram recounts how on one election day, a rickshaw puller "went mad" and approached the polls, attempting to vote for himself. When he arrived at the polls where the Great Socialists had already "tallied" the votes (all in favor of their party), Vijay and a policeman beat him with sticks and then, with their feet, "stamp him into the earth." Balram breaks into his narrative to point out the injustice of his being wanted for murder by the Indian police, who routinely terrorize and kill the poor.

By recounting incidents such as this one, Balram makes the reader see his own crime, the murder of Ashok, in a less harsh light. Against a backdrop of widespread police violence towards the innocent poor, the death of one rich man, himself part of the system of oppression, appears to be less obviously or exclusively a grave offense. Of course, this is also the logic that keeps India corrupt, and shows to the reader not necessarily what Balram intends it to: Balram's point is that his killing was justified; the author Adiga's point seems to be that India is so corrupt, its values so off base, that someone like Balram can come to see murder as not only justified but as a normal part of doing business.

After this brief history of Indian democracy as he knows it, Balram returns to describing the present elections. A few days after the trip to Laxmangahr, Vijay and the Great Socialist each separately visit the Stork's family in Dhanbad. The Great Socialist demands a large sum of money from the family, presumably to punish their grab for political power. When the family protests, the politician reminds them that he has turned a blind eye all these years when they stole coal from government mines, apparently the source of their fortune. Balram listens in on the conversations that follow: Ashok, Mukesh Sir, and Pinky Madam decide that they have to move to Delhi to ensure that they can bribe the right people and protect their business.

The exchanges between the Stork's family and the politicians reveal corruption on both sides. Both parties are trying to gain wealth and power in illicit ways without being caught, and each needs the other side's cooperation. It is a delicate dance of exploitation and never-ending bribery: money trumps politics, which become almost an afterthought. Meanwhile, as all of these elite do "business," the poor continue to suffer.

The Nepali tells Balram about the couple's move to Delhi, and that he will help him go in exchange for 5,000 rupees: otherwise, Ram Persad would be the obvious choice. Desperate to go, Balram begins to scheme and watch Ram Persad closely. Persad had recently begun behaving strangely, cooking at night, eating alone, and disappearing from the master's house at the same time each evening. Balram follows Ram Persad, and his suspicions are confirmed: the man is a Muslim, observing Ramadan. With the help of the Nepali, Ram Persad has concealed his faith from his Hindu master, who is deeply prejudiced against Muslims. Balram makes his discovery known to both the Nepali and Ram Persad, effectively blackmailing them so as to reverse the hierarchy among them to become "number one," and earning the right to travel to Delhi.

In discovering Ram Persad's secret, Balram demonstrates the strong intuition and observational powers of a "true entrepreneur", who learns and advances by being aware of his surroundings. Of course, Balram is also seeing destroying someone else's life as just another "entrepreneurial decision." Once again, faith becomes simply another tool that Balram can use to increase his status and bring down his superiors, Persad and the Nepali. Despite (or because of) the fact that he was abused and put down by the older servants, Balram doesn't spare them now that he is servant number one. He simply uses his new power to treat them with the same maliciousness they once showed him.

CHAPTER 4: THE FOURTH NIGHT

Balram describes Delhi's luxury high-rise apartment blocks, and its confusing network of roads and alleys where drivers are easily lost. In order to please Pinky Madam, who misses America, Ashok has rented an apartment in the modern, Americanized suburb of Gurgaon. Balram gets lost repeatedly as he tries to find the apartment building: Mukesh Sir scolds him, while Ashok defends him and catches his eye with a pitying look.

Ashok stands apart from the other members of his family because of the apparent sympathy he feels for Balram (note that Ashok has spent a lot of time in America, where the sorts of servitude and exploitation and corruption on display in India are less extreme). In this moment when Ashok catches Balram's eye, one wonders about the nature of his sympathy. He does pity Balram, but not enough to help Balram substantially improve his station in life.

Shortly after arriving in Delhi, Ashok, Pinky and Mukesh Sir go shopping. Balram waits outside the mall with the other drivers, one of whom he refers to as Vitiligo Lips. (Vitiligo is a skin disease that results in loss of skin color; treatment can reduce its impact, but not cure it.) Vitiligo Lips calls Balram "Country Mouse" and gives him tips on how to survive as a driver in Delhi: he stresses the importance of keeping one's mind occupied during long waits on the job, and offers Balram a trashy magazine called "Murder Weekly" which all the drivers read. He also says he can help Balram find prostitutes and foreign liquor for Ashok: Balram refuses and insists that Ashok is a good man.

Vitiligo Lips' behavior demonstrates yet again how the Rooster Coop is enforced from within. The seasoned driver genuinely wants to help Balram, but his way of doing so is to immediately introduce the innocent country boy to Dehli's corrupt, sordid side. Similarly, Balram's refusal to believe that Ashok would ever seek out prostitutes or foreign liquor reveals the thinking of someone born into servitude, someone who has not developed the impulse to question his superiors, someone who still idealizes the powerful. The "Murder Weekly" magazine is like tabloid culture gone totally insane: Indian society is depicted here as feeding on its own depravity.

A few days after his exchange with Vitiligo Lips, Balram takes Ashok and Mukesh Sir to deliver bribes to ministers. He drives them to their destinations in the Honda City, which is like a "dark egg" sealed protectively against Delhi's polluted air. After the brothers deliver their final bribe of the day, they drive past a well-known statue of Gandhi. Ashok, angered by the irony of passing this statue after bribing government officials, repeats, "It's a fucking joke."

Gandhi is held up across the world as a symbol and practitioner of moral conscientiousness. He led India to freedom from the British with a principled non-violence. Ashok's exclamation as the car drives past Gandhi's statue reveals his frustration that he must participate in his family's corrupt political dealings in a free India that has strayed so far from Gandhi's ideals. It also reflects the disillusionment with which Ashok views India as a whole. Unlike the rest of his family who care only about preserving their own power and luxury, Ashok has some idealism in him. He wishes things were better, non-corrupt, and has more sympathy for servants like Balram – though at the same time Ashok does not have the will or possibly even desire to actually stand up to his family and do something about it.

Partially because of his tense relationship with Pinky Madam, Mukesh Sir returns to Dhanbad. When Balram brings him to the railway station, Mukesh Sir issues several orders about how he should behave as a driver, and tries to convince Ashok to discipline Balram. Ashok waves off his brother and assures him that Balram is honest, that there is no cause for alarm. This is a crucial moment for Balram, who recognizes that his master is weak, vulnerable, and unused to having servants.

While Balram detected and appreciated Ashok's gentle nature from their first meeting, he almost instantly begins to perceive his master's kindness as vulnerability as opposed to a virtue. This shift reflects the cutthroat social environment of India: in a world where one is either predator or prey, little value can be placed on kindness towards others.

Soon after Mukesh Sir's departure, Balram begins a process of self-improvement. He tries to reform his bad habits and starts taking better care of his appearance. He stops chewing Paan, the tobacco-like substance, and attempts to distance himself from the other drivers, choosing to meditate alone in his car rather than keep them company. He buys a western t-shirt and sneaks into one of Dehli's shopping malls, usually off limits to the poor. He declares this adventure, "His first experience of being a fugitive."

Balram's attempts to study the ways of Delhi's rich and powerful in their natural habitat, the mall, reflect how he thinks about fashioning his own, ever-changing identity and his emphasis on a "street education" as being the most important. He believes that he need only study the habits and behavior of wealthy Indians, and remake himself in their image. That he describes his secret infiltration as his first *experience of being a fugitive suggests that there will be a* second *at some upcoming time.*

On the evening of Pinky Madam's birthday, Ashok orders Balram to dress as a Maharaja and serve the pair dinner. However, after dinner Ashok and Pinky get into a fight, and then ask Balram to drive them into Delhi for a drink. Afterwards, Pinky insists on driving them home even though she is drunk, and the car collides with an unidentified "small black thing" that dies instantly. Suspecting that they have killed a young child, Balram takes the wheel and speeds back to the apartment. He confirms that the accident's victim was a human child, but "reassures" Ashok that the child was "one of *those* people": a homeless wanderer who no one will look for, who's family will not press charges.

Ashok's apparent relief when he learns that Pinky hit a child from a poor family, (one of "those" people, as he puts it), reveals that despite his relatively more developed morals than his other family members he too feels the disregard and disdain for the poor displayed by other rich characters in the novel. Note, though, that while Balram wants to reassure Ashok that the victim was poor and therefore lacking in consequence, in reality Balram and the victim come from the same social class. Balram has at once internalized the sense of his own inferiority, and come to see himself as more a part of Ashok's family (even as a servant) than a member of his own class with responsibility or loyalty to that class.

The next morning, Mukesh Sir arrives from Dhanbad and summons Balram to the apartment. After telling Balram that he is "part of the family," the Mongoose makes him sign a document stating that Balram, not Pinky Madam, was driving the car that hit the unidentified person. The Mongoose reveals that he is prepared to bribe the judge assigned to their case, and that Balram's grandmother Kusum approves of this course of action. Balram breaks into his narrative to comment that, as outrageous as it seems, servants in India are often framed for crimes committed by their masters. Rather than protest, the servants' families feel only pride that their relatives serve their masters with such loyalty.

It is evident from Mukesh Sir's swift and decisive actions –his lack of qualms about framing Balram, and ability to easily secure Kusum's approval— that this sort of set-up is common practice for members of his class. That he calls Balram "part of the family" before asking him to sign away his life reflects the damaging and destructive notions of familial "duty" that operate within the traditional Indian family unit: family is posed here in such a way as being entirely made up of negative obligations to other family members. There is no reward in this for Balram other than getting to continue to serve his masters. And those in the Rooster Coop see Balram's loyalty, which made him sign away his future, if necessary, to protect someone else, as only something to be proud of, not as a sign of the extreme exploitation of the poor by the rich.

CHAPTER 5: THE FIFTH NIGHT

To explain how and why his masters feel justified in framing him for the hit-and-run accident, Balram introduces the metaphor of the **Rooster Coop**. As he sees it, India's poor are like roosters crowded together in cages, watching one another go to the slaughter yet unable or unwilling to escape the same fate. India's wealthy few have oppressed the poor so completely that the poor do not rebel, and instead perpetuate their own oppression. Balram goes on to explain that the Indian family unit is the reason the Rooster Coop stays intact, and that it takes a **White Tiger**, someone willing to see his family destroyed, to escape.

The extreme inequality brought about by the Rooster Coop complicates what is considered moral and immoral behavior. Any poor person who resists their lot in life risks having his or her family murdered as a consequence. This means that resistance is immoral (as it leads to certain punishment or death of your family), and faithful service to the wealthy is the only safe and moral path. Though the certain danger to one's family associated with resistance rules out what might usually be considered a noble course of action, this danger must be risked in order to escape a life of servitude to the cruel, wealthy elite. And Balram clearly identifies himself as one of those special people willing to make those sacrifices.

Having signed away his life in taking responsibility for killing the child, Balram sits in his room terrified and alone until the Stork, recently arrived in Delhi, summons him to the family's apartment. Instead of discussing Balram's future and what Balram fears will be his upcoming incarceration, the Stork asks him to massage his feet. They sit in silence until Pinky Madam enters the room and reminds them to tell Balram that he is free: through a contact in the police force, the family has discovered that no one saw the accident and charges will not be pressed.

That everyone in the Stork's family forgot entirely to inform Balram of the good news, even though his life hung in the balance, shows their utter disregard for and inability to empathize with him (or any other servant). When they need Balram to cooperate he is "part of the family," yet the minute his help becomes unnecessary they lose all sense for him as a human being.

A few days later, Pinky Madam wakes Balram early in the morning and has him drive her to the airport. She leaves Balram an envelop with money before catching a plane back to the US, leaving India forever and putting an end to her marriage. Later, Ashok becomes furious with Balram for helping Pinky escape and nearly throws Balram over a railing, but Balram knocks Ashok back by kicking him in the chest and defends himself by saying he didn't know what Pinky intended, and Ashok's anger soon turns into sadness. Over the following days and weeks, Balram begins to care for Ashok, cooking for his master and comforting him. Any anger Balram himself felt towards Ashok for attempting to blame the hit-and-run accident on him is overtaken by pity.

Pinky's decision to leave India and her marriage is never explicitly explained, though she has always yearned to return to the US and her hit-and-run killing of the child may have pushed her to finally make that decision. The physical fight between Ashok and Balram is interesting, as it seems more a battle between equals than master and servant, though the immediate rush of sympathy Balram subsequently feels for Ashok in his time of need, despite Ashok's demonstrated disregard for Balram's own welfare, shows yet again how deeply the servant's mentality is ingrained in Balram.

The Mongoose arrives in Delhi to help Ashok through his separation from Pinky, and also bearing a letter to Balram from Kusum Granny. Ashok and the Mongoose read aloud the letter, in which Kusum urges Balram to marry and subtly blackmails him to send money to his family, which he has neglected to do for months. Balram feels tempted by the short-term comforts of marriage, but knows he will never attain a higher social position or better life for himself if he allows himself to be saddled with the responsibilities of caring for a family.

Kusum's letter shows how destructive ideas about familial obligation in poor, rural Indian families help keep the Rooster Coop system in place. Though he is still young, Balram sees that Kusum's wish for him to marry is self-serving; his marriage would provide the family with short-term financial security in the form of a dowry, but –because of its premature timing—would mean a life of poverty for himself and his future children.

CHAPTER 6: THE SIXTH MORNING

Balram claims that Delhi corrupted him, made him capable of murder and rebellion, only after the city corrupted Ashok. After Pinky's departure, Ashok begins going out to bars and clubs at night. As his driver on these trips, Balram experiences Delhi's sordid underbelly. He feels that Ashok's desire for women is contagious, and responds almost immediately to Ashok's lust by feeling it himself.

Balram feels his master's lust and restlessness as though they share the same body. Even though he has begun to resent being Ashok's servant, his sense of Ashok's power and superiority has been so deeply ingrained in his mind that he can't escape it.

During one of Ashok's evenings out, Balram wanders into a nearby bookshop to pass the time. He chats with the bookseller and asks to stand near the books, just to feel the "electricity" of knowledge they give off. He mulls over Pinky Madam's parting gift to him of 4700 rupees, and concludes that this money represented just a small part of the money she had withdrawn for herself. After he returns Ashok to the apartment building, he drives the Honda City recklessly around Delhi and spits all over the car.

Balram once denied that Ashok would ever chase women. Now, Balram's rebellious and resentful feelings grow stronger as he watches Ashok drink, spend lavishly, and chase women night after night. He begins to lose his illusions about Ashok and to think about his masters' past behavior, sparking the realization that whatever generosity they have shown him (for instance, Pinky Madam's parting gift) was only a small fraction of what they could afford. Note the similarity between Balram's spitting at the Black Fort and his spitting in the car: once again he seems to be scorning something, to be breaking away from it.

The following evening, Balram drives Ashok around the city to deliver bribes. One minister's assistant joins Ashok in the car and convinces him to hire a beautiful Ukrainian prostitute. When Ashok guiltily complies, Balram observes the woman from the front seat and is fascinated by her golden-haired, exotic western looks. After Ashok goes home, Balram drives back to the hotel where the men took the prostitute, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. When this fails, he takes another forbidden drive around Delhi. He feels that something is burning inside him, that the city reflects and feeds his angry, rebellious feelings.

Balram insists that the city of Delhi itself is a corrupting influence for both him and Ashok, like a mirror showing back to him his own feelings of anger and rebellion. Balram describes the process of his own corruption as a passive experience. It is simply a response to Ashok's behavior and to life in Delhi. This passive take on his own corruption ties into the lack of remorse he later expresses for his own immoral behavior, and also ties into the novel's general indictment of Indian society: both that it is so corrupt that it really does mainly reward those who are unethical, criminal, and corrupt; and also that it lacks the values that would make Balram see that of course there are moral lines that he should not cross, that no one can justify crossing.

CHAPTER 7: THE SIXTH NIGHT

Soon after Ashok's evening with the minister's assistant, Balram asks Vitiligo Lips to find him a golden haired prostitute. He also asks the older driver for advice on how to cheat his master. Balram begins selling petrol from the Honda City's tank, visiting corrupt mechanics that overcharge for repairs, and using the car as a freelance taxi. He finds that each time he cheats Ashok, he doesn't feel guilt but rage. Balram claims that he was "growing a belly" at last.

Balram used to see Ashok as being better than him. As he ceases to be idealistic about Ashok, he starts to want what Ashok has—prostitutes, money—to believe that he deserves these things just as much as Ashok does. And the more Balram steals, the more he realizes how much less he still has than his master. He understands the size of the inequality between them, and rage drives him to want everything .

Using the money he stole from Ashok, Balram hires a golden-haired prostitute with the help of Vitiligo Lips. To his disappointment, she is not nearly as attractive as Ashok's Ukrainian girl. He learns that her name means, "Girl" just his former name, "Munna," means "Boy" in Hindi. Balram discovers quickly that the girl's hair is not naturally blonde but dyed, and gets into a brawl with the manager. He is thrown out of the hotel without having had sex at all.

This episode only fuels Balram's growing frustration with the inequality between rich and poor. Even when he attempts to buy himself a pleasure that his wealthy master enjoys, the quality of the experience falls short. On the one hand, he is taken advantage of because of his low social standing. On the other, the lesson he can take from this is that the reason his "golden-haired prostitute" isn't as good as Ashok's is simply a matter of money. He could have what Ashok wants if he only had enough money.

When Balram returns home, Ashok is waiting for him in the servants' quarters. Ashok claims that he is tired of living the comfortable yet soulless life of a rich Indian man. He says that he constantly allows himself to be exploited, and yet doesn't have the courage to change his ways. He asks Balram to bring him to a teashop where he can eat like a "simple man." At the teashop Balram orders Ashok enough food to feed a family, and watches resentfully as Ashok eats it all.

As Balram is starting to see himself as deserving of the things Ashok has, Ashok is starting to see the things he has as worthless. However, though Ashok's complaints describe an authentic feeling he is having and his willingness to say them indicate a real closeness to Balram, the complaints about his aimless and empty life nonetheless only serve to reveal the great distance between master and servant. Ashok wants to experience how the "simple man" lives, but in doing so displays a willful ignorance about poverty in India by ordering and eating enough food to feed a family (and offering none of it to Balram).

Ashok continues to bribe ministers on schedule, distributing money in a red, Italian leather bag. One morning, Balram brings the red bag down to the car while Ashok finishes getting ready. He opens the bag and, dazzled by the enormous quantity of money inside, can't rid himself of the thought of stealing it. He thinks to himself that taking the money wouldn't in fact be stealing, but recovering what is rightfully owed him. Ashok planned to distribute the money to avoid paying income tax, which—had it been paid—would have gone to helping poor people like Balram.

Balram's reasoning about stealing the money again highlights how the tremendous inequality between rich and poor in India complicates traditional notions of morality. Acts normally classified as immoral, such as stealing, seem justified when the target of the robbery belongs to a cruel and corrupt ruling class. Balram's logic here mirrors that of Robin Hood, with the exception that Robin Hood stole from the rich and gave to the poor, while Balram is thinking about stealing from the rich and keeping everything.


Balram mulls over the possibility of stealing the money as he roams Delhi's streets, seeing everywhere symbols of his own oppression and looking for a sign as to what he should do next. He stops at a book market where a Muslim bookseller reads him a poem: "You were looking for the key for years/ But the door was always open!" He asks the man if poetry can make a man "vanish," then flees the bookseller's suspicious gaze. He visits the butchers' quarter in Old Delhi, where he sees a buffalo pulling a cart loaded with the heads of dead buffalos, the faces of which seem to resemble the faces of his own family.

On the one hand, the Muslim poet's words seem to encourage Balram in moving forward with his plans to steal Ashok's money, as if his struggles, his anger, and frustration are products only of his lack of understanding that he could change it at any time, that he could take what he wants by just taking this decisive step. On the other hand, the buffalo carting its terrible load reminds him of the fates that will fall upon his family members should he actually proceed to act.


The following day, Balram finds an iron wrench in the parking lot outside Ashok's apartment complex. Intending to use it as a weapon, he brings it back to his room where –to his great surprise—he finds his young cousin Dharam. Balram then learns that Kusum sent Dharam to Delhi for Balram to mentor, along with a letter threatening to arrange a marriage for Balram in his absence. She also threatens to tell the Stork's family that Balram hasn't sent back any money in months. The new responsibility of caring for Dharam saves Balram "from the edge of the precipice," and forces him to admit to himself that he has been plotting murder.

Throughout the novel, family loyalty and love often appear as weaknesses that keep an individual from being able to advance. Dharam's arrival fits into this pattern: for better or for worse, it forces Balram to temporarily halt his plans to murder Ashok just when he had made up his mind to act, and postpones his taking a step to radically alter his future.

Shortly after Dharam's arrival, Ashok learns that the ruling national government has lost the election to several oppositional parties, including the Great Socialist's party. The Stork's family had anticipated that the government would win by a landslide, and is frantic because they neglected to bribe the winning parties. Ashok hurries to fix the mess. Balram drives him to meet with two of the Great Socialist's representatives and, after agreeing to pay a large sum of money, Ashok loans them the use of his car. Balram is shocked to discover that one of the men he is driving is his childhood hero Vijay, who has "changed uniforms again" for the suit and tie of an Indian businessman.

Vijay reappears in Balram's life having now perfectly positioned himself within the ranks of the winning political party. Though Vijay's success must have taken a great deal of work and strategy, Balram is particularly impressed by Vijay's suit and tie. Balram's admiration for Vijay's new uniform implies that his idea of identity is flexible and surface-level: it largely has to do with observing and adopting outward appearances, and accumulating visible signs of wealth and power.


Over glasses of Johnny Walker Black whiskey, Vijay and his companion discuss how they will be sure to get the correct amount of money from Ashok, and decide that it is not worth the trouble of threatening him with physical violence, as he doesn't have the courage or cunning to avoid paying up. They move on to discuss the election, and in particular the good fortune that their party has a foothold in Bangalore, the city they believe holds the future of Indian business. After they exit the car, Balram takes the bottle of whiskey they left behind and smashes it on the pavement, creating a sharp-edged weapon.

The conversation of Vijay and the other man further indicates Ashok's weakness and vulnerability to Balram. Balram used to idealize Ashok. These men seem to have only contempt for him. Note also how Balram's "original listening" and general resourcefulness give him the murder weapon he needs and the idea of where to flee after committing the act: to Bangalore.

The following morning, Balram asks Ashok for time off so that he can take Dharam to the Delhi Zoo. Balram's nerves are on edge all morning with the knowledge of the crime he plans to commit. When he and Dharam come upon a **white tiger** pacing back and forth in his cage, Balram locks eyes with the animal and faints. Back at the apartment, Balram dictates a letter for Dharam to write down. The letter is written as if from Dharam's point of view, and ends with Dharam witnessing Balram regain consciousness from his faint, and Balram crying out that an apology to his Kusum Granny, but that he cannot keep living in a cage all his life. He orders Dharam to mail the letter to Kusum Granny as soon as he, Balram, leaves in the car with Ashok the next day.

Balram's encounter with his namesake, the White Tiger, fortifies him in his decision to kill Ashok. It is as though seeing the tiger reminds him of his own inborn potential, of the special intelligence that has always set him apart from others, and that entitles him to act above certain moral and legal restrictions. He also confronts the future he faces should he decide not to take action: life as a caged animal, serving the rich. The apology he dictates in his letter to his grandmother reflects his knowledge that when he kills Ashok, he will also be sentencing the rest of his family members to death from Ashok's family.

The following morning, Balramdrives Ashok from bank to bank to fill the red bag with money for his master's final bribe. As they drive towards the Sheraton Hotel to deliver the complete sum, Balram pretends that there is a problem with one of the car's wheels and pulls over. He convinces Ashok to exit the car, kneel down and examine the wheel. As Ashok does so, Balram brings the broken bottle of Johnny Walker Black down on Ashok's head from behind, then turns him around and stabs him in the throat. (He remarks that this is how Muslims kill their chickens.) Balram explains that he killed Ashok rather than stunning him because he knows that Ashok's family will brutally murder his own family once they discover Balram's guilt: he is simply "getting his revenge in advance."

Balram's remark that he slit Ashok's throat the way Muslims kill chickens situates his murder directly in the context of the Rooster Coop. He has escaped its logic by turning the tables on his master. However, Balram's decision to kill Ashok as a form of "revenge in advance," anticipating that Ashok's family will take their revenge out on his own family, indicates that the Rooster Coop is still firmly in place, and nothing has changed. Though Balram has escaped, his family will be victims of the Coop's cruel logic.

The deed done, Balram covers his tracks as best he can and scatters Ashok's body with stickers of the holy goddess Kali, thinking that they may help his dead master's soul reach heaven. He drives to the train station to make his escape, but is tortured with indecision about whether or not to rescue Dharam. He goes back to get his cousin in Gurgaon despite the risk of getting caught, and the two flee to Bangalore together.

After murdering his master in cold-blood, Balram spends valuable time trying to send Ashok's soul to heaven, once again hinting at Balram's continued instinct toward religious belief. He also rescues Dharam, the only family member he has the power to save. His contradictory behavior shows that he feels moral responsibility for his actions on some level: his sense of attachment and responsibility towards Ashok and his family is genuine, even though he has sentenced all of them to death.

CHAPTER 8: THE SEVENTH NIGHT

Balram describes for Wen Jiabao how he went from living as a fugitive to becoming a pillar of Bangalore society. On their way to Bangalore after the murder, Balram and Dharam stop at a teashop where they discover a police poster out for Balram's arrest. As Balram examines it "with a sense of pride." an illiterate man approaches him and asks what crime the man in the poster has committed: he is unable to recognize Balram from the photo at all, as the photo looks like it could be of half the men in India.

Although Balram has just escaped from Delhi, the ineffective police poster with its grainy photograph makes it seem as though the process of remaking himself has already begun. It also emphasizes how all those trapped in the Rooster Coop essentially look the same, while Balram has now made himself something other than a rooster in a coop. Balram no longer resembles the boy he was. Of course, Balram sees this change as a source of pride, as him becoming a true entrepreneur, while one might also argue that what he has become is a corrupt murderer.

Looking back on the period after the murder, Balram estimates that it took him four weeks in Bangalore to calm his nerves. He explains that he is not like the Indian politicians who can kill and move on immediately. He and Dharam keep to themselves until Balram finally takes courage and ventures out into the city. He tries to "hear the city's voice," just as he heard Dehli's by sitting at cafés and writing down what he overhears.

Balram's claim that it took him four weeks to recover from the murder, and his notion that this is a relatively long period of time, reveal his complicated relationship with his crime. He recognizes that he committed a terrible act, but when he compares his murder to the many murders committed by India's rich and powerful, he feels himself to be almost virtuous. Meanwhile, he applies himself to learning from the streets of Bangalore as he learned from the streets of Delhi before.

Balram quickly learns that Bangalore revolves around outsourcing, and companies that conduct business with Americans over the phone. Because of the time difference, men and women in Bangalore work on a nocturnal schedule. Balram realizes that the companies must need drivers to transport their employees back home safely at night, and resolves to start a taxi service that will do the job. After using some of the money he stole from Ashok to bribe the police to help eliminate his competition and make him appear as a legitimate businessman, he creates his "start-up": **White Tiger** Drivers.

Once again, Balram's ability to swiftly and totally reinvent himself brings him entrepreneurial success. His sense of himself as a White Tiger –an unusually intelligent, capable person subject to different moral codes and standards— allows him to justify pursuing his goals in underhanded ways. Note again, though, that while struggling to escape the Rooster Coop he wholeheartedly believes in the corrupt practices (bribery, etc) of the Light. Balram isn't trying to change things in his society, he just wants to be one of the winners in that society.

White Tiger Drivers is an immediate success, and Balram quickly becomes a wealthy man. He renames himself Ashok Sharma after his master, but unlike the late Ashok he keeps his employees at a respectful distance. He tries to set an example with his behavior in the hopes that they will move up in life. Balram claims that he doesn't "insult" his employees by telling them they are like family, and simply asks that they do their jobs responsibly.

By adopting the name Ashok, Balram's transformation is complete. However, his choice to take his former master's name shows that he has no desire to totally erase all traces of his former self. Each stage in his journey from rickshaw driver's son to business entrepreneur is an important part of his identity. It also shows that he still feels some kind of connection to and perhaps guilt about Ashok, as well as that he has now achieved what he wanted: to have what Ashok had. At the same time he corrects Ashok's mistakes: he treats his employees like employees.

Despite his newfound wealth and power, Balram tries not to lose touch with the place he got his true education: the open road. As he wanders around Bangalore, he hears stirrings and rumors of revolution, of men trying to break out of the **Rooster Coop**. He doubts that anything will happen, because the Indian people wait passively for revolution to come from elsewhere, when in reality it is up to each individual to create his own revolution.

Balram's experience has proven his conviction that the most important part of an entrepreneur's education involves developing an awareness of one's surroundings. His commitment to remaining in touch with his environment is unchanged, even after he achieves wealth and stability. His thoughts about revolution are interesting, in that once again he seems to believe only in a "revolution" of individual action, in which an individual acts solely to help himself as opposed to help others. Balram's "revolution" changed nothing except Balram's own social position.

Balram changes gears to recount an incident that occurred a few nights earlier. One of his drivers, Mohammad Asif, hit and killed a boy who had been riding a bicycle. Balram ordered Asif to call the police, who Balram has bought off with many bribes, and thereby manages to prevent the family from registering the case. Luckily the police are not required to register a bicyclist's death, as they would a motorcyclist's or a driver's.

Now that Balram has the money, he follows the example of his former masters and distributes bribes with the same regularity they once did. The mirroring of this car accident with the accident in which Pinky killed the child highlights how, even though he was once a victim of his wealthy masters' corrupt maneuvering, he has no reservations about imitating their behavior.

Balram visits the victim's parents the following day and expresses his deep sorrow for their loss, mentioning that he himself has lost many relatives. He gives them twenty-five thousand rupees and offers to train their other son as a driver in his company. Upon his return to the office, Asif asks Balram why he "wasted" so much money on the victim's family, from whom the company had nothing to fear. Balram explains that he had to "do something different"— that he could not behave like the landlords of Laxmangahr. Balram explains further in his letter to Wen Jiabao: he (Balram) is in the Light now, where if a man wants to be good, he can be.

Balram views bribing the police to prevent the pressing of charges against his company as a necessary precaution, yet feels a sense of responsibility towards the victim's family. While he has adopted the corrupt, self-interested behavior of Ashok's family, his experience as a poor villager at the mercy of the Indian elite has caused him to feel a certain obligation to act morally. Yet his morality involves paying money for a death that his driver caused—he only gives that money once he's sure that his business is secure. Now that he is among the privileged in the Light and his own survival is secured, he feels he can afford to act with charity towards others, but one might argue that while he gives, he, like Ashok and Ashok's family, doesn't give everything he can. His own self-interest still comes first.

Balram addresses the question of guilt. He feels none towards Ashok: instead of dreaming that the dead man pursues him, Balram says that his nightmares are that he never committed the murder, and is still a servant in Delhi. Balram's feelings about his family are more complicated. He assumes that the Stork's family had his relatives killed, but tries not to dwell on their fate. To explain this seemingly monstrous attitude towards their deaths, he tells a story about the Buddha. When the Buddha was asked whether he was a man or a God, Buddha responded, "Neither. I am just one who has woken up while the others are sleeping." Balram feels himself to have done the same.

Balram believes that the struggle to escape social and economic subjugation in Indian society, to achieve control over one's future and to "wake up" from a life of servitude, trumps traditional notions of good vs. evil, God vs. the devil. He believes that the extreme inequality between rich and poor, as well as the complete lack of opportunity the poor have for self-advancement, render his crime and decision to sacrifice his family somewhat understandable. Balram a murderer and thief who has built a business on the backs of that murder and theft, is comparing himself to the Buddha, that exemplar of peace. That he can even make such a comparison is an indictment of the society in which he lives.

Balram brings his letter to Jiabao to a close, writing that the act of sharing his story with its secrets about entrepreneurship represents a significant leap forward in relations between India and China. He describes with enthusiasm the rapid economic development of Bangalore, and how exciting it is to feel like he himself has contributed to its growth.

Balram's desire to share his secrets about entrepreneurship with a Chinese official, and to situate his story in the context of a political relationship, indicates that his vision for himself could involve following in Vijay's footsteps and pursuing a future in politics. It also connects Balram the individual with India the nation. Both Balram, and the novel, see Balram as a kind of metaphor for the country as a whole. Of course, Balram sees himself as a positive example of the nation, while the novel itself reads as an indictment of the society that would mold Balram to become the man he has grown into.

Balram proclaims that he is a first-gear man who looks at tomorrow instead of today: he knows he will become restless, sell his business, and move on to the next venture soon enough. He has already started purchasing real estate in Bangalore to lease to Americans, who he anticipates will soon flood the city. He imagines starting a school for poor children in Bangalore with his money, providing of course that he does not get caught for his crime. Yet Balram also feels that even if he is discovered, he will never regret what he did. In his eyes, the opportunity to experience living like a man, freed from servitude, has justified his crime.

Balram's surprising admission that he dreams of starting a school reveals that even as he proclaims the virtues of learning from experience, or "on the road," part of him still believes strongly in the virtues of a formal education. Here there is a hint that he wants to help young Indians from the Rooster Coop to better their fates. Yet at the same time he continues to believe that his murder and theft were just, that his actions that led to the death of his family were simply the price to pay for freedom.

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