



Urban Dreams and Rural Realities: An Interrogation of Migration in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This study examines an individual's profound desire to enhance their socioeconomic life through the concept of internal migration, as depicted in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2012). Through the character of Balram Halwai, the book provides insights into the socioeconomic factors that drive forced migration from rural to urban areas. The study emphasises various aspects of migration, with nuances best explained through Everett Lee's Push-Pull theory and Ernst George Ravenstein's second and third laws of migration. By using a qualitative socio-analytical approach, the article examines the dynamics of migration and the inequalities present in Delhi.

Keywords: Migration, Rural-Urban Transition, Social Disparities, Socioeconomic Aspirations, Laws of Migration, Push-Pull Factors.

Introduction

Migration is an inherent and universal phenomenon that represents a pivotal point in an individual's life, influencing their decision to improve living standards. The present study examines the socioeconomic aspirations and developmental challenges that migration presents in an individual's life, as illustrated by the life of Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel. Combining Lee's Push factors and pull factors, along with Ravenstein's Laws of Migration, the study aims to convey the elements of migration and its patterns in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Lee's push factors examine the situations that force an individual to leave their hometown. In contrast, the Pull factors examine the attraction that entices one to shift, opposite to the Push factors. In addition, Ravenstein's Laws of Migration demonstrate various factors, including the kinds of human migration patterns. Migration occurs for several reasons, including economic crises, identity crises, family pressures, and natural disasters, often forcing people to migrate from their homes to others.

In his journey from village to city, from Laxmangarh to Delhi, the entrepreneur's path crosses any number of provincial towns that have the pollution and noise and traffic of a big city, without any hint of true city's sense of history, planning and grandeur. Half-baked cities, built for half-baked men. (Adiga, 2021, p. 52)

The novel critiques the societal structures, like the caste system and economic inequality, that contribute to migration, along with the haunting image of “half-baked cities, built for half-baked cities” (52), capturing one migrant’s hope to find an aspiration in his life for upward mobility and economic benefits. This reflects on how migration, as a concept, gives hope and a vision of freedom to those trapped in different forms of poverty.

This article critically examines the multidimensional aspects of migration in India, including the economic, social, cultural, environmental, and government aspects. This study aims to examine the novel through the lens of Everett Lee’s Push factors, which dissect the forceful reasons that lead one to leave their residence due to potential problems or hurdles, and Pull factors, which sift through the allure of the destination. In addition, Ravenstein’s Laws of Migration defines the set of principles derived by geographer E. G. Ravenstein that highlight the laws governing the dispersion and absorption of migrants, including the human patterns of migration. Ultimately, this paper provides insights into the interconnected elements of migration, the socioeconomic aspirations of individuals, and the developmental challenges through the interrogation of Adiga’s narrative.

Aravind Adiga, an Indian writer and journalist, won the Man Booker Prize for his novel, *The White Tiger*, in 2008. His notable novels include *Between the Assassinations* (2008), a short story collection, *Last Man in Tower* (2011), *Selection Day* (2017), *Amnesty* (2020), an undocumented Sri Lankan immigrant’s story that was shortlisted for the 2021 Miles Franklin Award (“Aravind Adiga”, 2024). These notable works showcase his talent in portraying human existence. Adiga portrays the life of Balram Halwai, the son of a village rickshaw puller, and his transition from the rural setting of Laxmangarh in Bihar to the urban landscape of Delhi in his acclaimed novel, *The White Tiger*.

Materials and Methods

This research engages a qualitative literary analysis method, interweaving a close textual reading of the novel with the multifaceted aspects of migration, examining the precarity and displacement. The study integrates the theoretical frameworks of Everett Lee’s Push-Pull theory and Ernst George Ravenstein’s (2nd and 3rd) Laws of migration. Moreover, Lee’s Push factors examine the situations that force an individual to leave their hometown. In contrast, the Pull factors examine the attraction that entices one to shift, opposite to the Push factors. “The major push factors influencing migration include but are not limited to general crime and violence, an unstable economy which in turn affects an individual’s social and economic opportunities and career advancement” (Parkins, p. 17). Lowell and Findlay (2001, p. 3) purport that not only has the demand for skilled labor in developed countries increased, but pull factors such as “better wages and employment conditions, better information, recruitment, and cheaper transportation,” encourage skilled migrants to seek jobs and opportunities in developed countries. In addition, Ravenstein’s Laws of migration demonstrate varied factors, including the kinds of human migration patterns. Ravenstein’s laws refer to the rural-urban movement as it exhibits responses to the economic opportunities in the large centers of commerce and industry (Maciso and Pryor, 1963). Thus, it demonstrates how Ravenstein’s Laws of Migration link the novel. Through these theories and migration patterns, the study illustrates the ethical implications of upward mobility through migration and how it is explored in Balram’s narration. Subsequently, the study analyses the relationship between the rural-to-urban transition of an individual and economic development. Combining these theories, the study aims to examine an individual’s journey from rural to urban and reflect on the socioeconomic disparities that pressurized them for a transition. To sum up, this paper interrogates the internal migrant portrayal in Aravind

Adiga's *The White Tiger*, reflecting on the systemic failures of rural areas and urban dynamics, employing Lee's Migration factors and Ravenstein's laws as an analytical tool.

Push and pull factors are not just simple concepts, but a complex theory of migration, delving into the intricate reasons behind one's migration. The study brings to light the multifaceted aspects of migration, amalgamating the theoretical frameworks of Everett Lee's Push-Pull theory. Lee's Push factors scrutinize the circumstances that compel an individual to depart from their hometown. In contrast, the Pull factors scrutinize the allure that beckons one to relocate, which is opposite to the Push factors. Adiga vividly illustrates Balram's transition due to the push-pull factors. To break free from poverty, caste oppression, and the coercive influence of the family, Balram's choice to depart from his hometown serves as the Push factor. Laxmangarh is a village with deficient infrastructure and inadequacies. Balram characterizes Laxmangarh as a typical village:

Yes, a typical village paradise, Mr. Jiabao. Down the middle of the main road, families of pigs are sniffing through the sewage – the upper body of each animal is dry, with long hairs that are matted together into spines; the lower half of the body is peat black and glistening from sewage. Vivid red and brown flashes of feather – roosters fly up and won the roofs of the houses. Past the hogs and roosters, you'll get to my house – if it still exists. (Adiga, 2021, p.20)

Balram narrates the stark reality of oppression, the dire health conditions of the people, and the struggles he lived through in his village. "Electricity poles – defunct. Water tap – broken. Children – too lean and short for their age and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India (p. 20). The village's inadequate infrastructure, pollution, and insufficiencies illustrate the systemic failure to provide necessities. Balram's father's death serves as an illustration of the same systemic failure, of no proper medical care in the hospital.

Well, maybe the doctor will turn up in the evening. He did not. Around six o'clock that day, as the government ledger, no doubt accurately reported, my father was permanently cured of his tuberculosis. The ward boys made us clean up after Father before we could remove the body. A goat came in and sniffed as we were mopping the blood off the floor. The ward boys petted her and fed her a plump carrot as we mopped our father's infected blood off the floor. (Adiga, 2021, pp. 50-51)

These conditions personify the difference between rural and urban realities. According to the UNDP report of 2009, "Internal migrants are four times more than the international migrants in a metropolitan city. The report says that, internal migration not only involves poorer segments, it impacts the economy as a whole" (Srivastava, 2011). The societal discrimination and subjugation in the name of caste and class, combined with inadequate infrastructure, can be referred to as push factors of migration. Balram's transition from Laxmangarh to Delhi portrays his move from an impoverished life to a hopeful life. His way of finding new opportunities and desires illustrates the life of an ordinary man and his quest for freedom and breaking the frontiers.

Pull factors of migration are factors that attract people to a specific location. In the novel, Balram migrates from his village to a metropolitan city. "There was money in the air in Dhanbad. I saw buildings with sides made entirely of glass and men with gold in their teeth" (p.53). His transition to Delhi centres on his desire for upward mobility, seeking better job opportunities and lifestyle, as

the city offers him a better standard of living. “We were like two separate cities – inside and outside the dark egg. I knew I was in the right city” (p.138). The city is attractive to new opportunities, infrastructure, and facilities, which led him to migrate to the particular location. “The main thing to know about Delhi is that the roads are good, and the people are bad” (p.124). Balram’s job as a driver under Mr. Ashok and his wife, Pinky, exposes him to a better lifestyle than in his village. His growth from poverty to being a driver in an urban city helped him to pursue economic aspirations. “These poor bastards had come from the Darkness to Delhi to find some light – but they were still in the darkness” (p. 138). As a function of colonization, these global cities have seen cultural conflicts, segregation, and inequality, as well as the center and the margin. The majority of people in these global cities represent a world of global values and express their dissatisfaction with their circumstances (Chew, 2017). Balram’s life in the city made him learn new cultures and gave him a new identity, leaving behind the societal labels that oppressed him in Laxmangarh.

Ernst Georg Ravenstein, a German-English geographer and cartographer, is acknowledged as the father of migration theory. His laws, presented in three papers portraying variations of the laws in 1876, 1885, and 1889, are comprehensive factors influencing migration. They highlight the factors influencing migration over long distances, intervening obstacles, gender, age, and economic factors (Study Smarter, 2024). These laws include – that most migration is over short distances, migration occurs in steps, migration in opposite directions, long-distance migrants usually move to urban areas, most migrants are adults, cities grow more from migration than natural increase, migration increases with economic development, and most migration for economic reasons, provide a detailed understanding of migration patterns (“Ernst Georg Ravenstein”, 2024). An outcome of the “Discussion of Mr. Ravenstein’s Paper” was that both author and discussants agreed that the “laws” were not immutable rules but rather “empirical generalizations” specific to the time and place of the evidence (Lomax, Rees, 2020).

Analyzing Balram’s journey through Ravenstein’s laws of migration focuses on distance and urbanization trends, and reveals how his transformation from a village boy led to a successful entrepreneur. Ravenstein’s first law points to migration over a short distance, which depicts Balram’s journey to Delhi as an internal migration for a better future and economic reasons. Balram’s decision to leave his village emanated from the scarcity of opportunities and poverty. The journey depicts the rural-to-urban migration of an individual due to the calamities of fulfilling their dreams. Balram’s migration can be linked to the second and third laws of Ravenstein, as it demonstrates short distances and urban attraction in the study. Balram's journey, fraught with challenges, has significantly contributed to his personal growth, a fact that we, as readers, can empathize with. The protagonist’s journey exemplifies the laws of migration, integrating “the Darkness” of the rural space with the “Light” of urban opportunities.

Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness. But this is not the time of day I talk about, Mr Premier! I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies. Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency,

that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. (Adiga, 2021, p. 14)

Balram's journey from one village to a city enumerates one's journey to overcome the struggles and limited opportunities as the city or the urban areas are attractive for economic mobility and are one step ahead in life. Ravenstein's laws mention migration increases with economic development, and most migration for economic reasons provides insights into Balram's journey to Delhi, seeking economic stability and an enriched life. Balram's journey portrays the contrast between poverty in Laxmangarh and economic stability and growth in Delhi, and later to Bangalore to become an entrepreneur. He did not find opportunities, a superior lifestyle, or happiness in his rural village. His migration exhibits revolt, accepting stoicism, for upward mobility, as the urban city exhibits economic stability and a better existence.

Balram's migration from his village to Delhi and later to Bangalore illustrates Ravenstein's principles of migration. Balram's perception of Delhi as a metropolitan city that provides more opportunities, good living, and economic stability led to an attractive element for the transition. "Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That's my whole philosophy in a sentence" (Adiga, 2021, p. 276). After attempting the murder too, he chooses to escape from Delhi to Bangalore, as he realises Bangalore is more suitable for him to hide and reinvent himself as an entrepreneur. The transition changed his identity. "I moved out of the hotel and took a flat on rent. Now I had to make a living in Bangalore – I had to find out how I could fit into this city. I tried to hear Bangalore's voice, just as I had heard Delhi's" (p. 297). Adiga portrays the beauty of Bangalore and Delhi as the cities that Balram chooses for his transitions from one to another for survival. "By rooting Balram Halwai's experience in Ravenstein's framework, *The White Tiger* offers a powerful exploration of how migration shapes individuals' identities.

Insights derived from the theoretical frameworks of push–the–pull model by Everett Lee (1966), the human capital model by Sjaastad (1962), the utility model by Wolpert (1965), and the unemployment model by Harris and Todaro (1970) (Duan, 2012) help uncover the nuances of these issues. Initially, this paper aims to portray Balram's journey from Laxmangarh to Delhi through the lens of push-pull factors and migration laws, examining the impact of migration on Balram's identity and sense of self.

Results and Discussions

Balram's transition from a rural area of Laxmangarh to an urban area of Delhi symbolises the paradoxes of migration, exhibiting an individual's life from the Darkness of rural to the Light of an urban city. It signifies an individual's desire to escape from the societal disparities and constraints of caste and class. Migration results from the repulsion of agriculture, not the attraction that led to urbanisation. T. Papaalias (2013) observes how the decline of the agricultural sector has driven migration from rural areas. It is associated with economic activities, triggering a cascading effect that exacerbates economic inequality between industrial cities and rural areas. It portrays the reason behind the displacement of agricultural workers due to the squeeze on agriculture, followed by their families. In contrast, he mentions the economic decline in rural areas, as the migration shrinks the local market, reduces the demand, and adversely affects the income of the non-agricultural businesses

in rural communities. Migration to the cities is due to the economic decline diminishing rural commercial towns (Papa Elias, 2013).

Adiga portrays the ethical dilemmas he confronts through Balram's murder attempt. Balram's realization of the defined importance of money led him to kill his master. An individual's decision to migrate relies upon various circumstances and a wide range of reasons. "They were all headed from the Darkness to Delhi. You'd think the whole world was migrating" (Adiga, 2021, p. 111). People migrate from one city to another and from one country to another, which is portrayed as internal migration that is within the country and external migration across national borders to fulfill their dreams and aspirations of a better economic status and opportunities. "I am tomorrow" (p. 318). This quote conveys his ambition for a self-made identity. Socioeconomic aspirations examine one's aim or goals set by oneself for the culmination of success. "Someone in his family was going to make it out of the Darkness and into New Delhi" (p. 111). Adiga embodies Balram Halwai's transition from his impoverished Laxmangarh to Delhi, the capital city, in search of jobs for economic and cultural growth. Halwai's desire to get rid of caste oppression, poverty, financial crises, and identity crises for upward mobility through migration leads him to the city of Metropolis. Balram's entrepreneurship dream and the murder of his employer, Mr. Ashok, in the novel highlight how he imposed inequality and exploitation. "The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave" (p. 275). His quest for an ambitious life being a loyal servant to a ruthless entrepreneur defines the dark side of migration, which portrays instincts of survival and ambition. "Now, I'd already seen most of the famous sights of Delhi – the House of Parliament, the Jantar Mantar, the most important one of all" (p. 135). The dream to break the frontiers of being a servant for equality and freedom led one to make crucial decisions for one's survival, as survival is the ultimate level of thinking.

Balram encounters violence and various obstacles in his journey of transition from rural to urban migration for a better job and empowerment, which exacts its costs in a large sacrifice of one's conscience.

Everyone! He shouted. Take off your shirts! I've got to see a man's nipples before I gave him a job. He looked at my chest; he squeezed the nipples – slapped my butt- glared into my eyes – and then poked the stick against my thigh: Too thin! Fuck off! Give me a chance, sir – my body is small but there's a lot of fight in it – I'll dig for you, I'll haul cement for you, I'll. He swung his stick; it hit me on the left ear. I fell down, and others rushed to take my place. (p. 55)

Ultimately, in Delhi, being a migrant, he confronts the dichotomy of aspirations versus challenge. "On Sundays, you even got a special dish, rice mixed with small red chunks of boneless chicken. I had never had a regular chicken dish in my life until then; it made you feel like a king, eating chicken Sunday after Sunday and then licking your fingers" (p. 67). Even though Balram was taken as a driver, he was forced to do housekeeping services in his master's house. In the novel, Balram describes it in the letter as,

Now, I say they took me on as their driver. I don't exactly know how you organize your servants in China. But in India – or, at least, in the Darkness - the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants. What I mean is that anytime I was not

driving the car, I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a long broom, or chase a cow out of the compound. (p. 68)

Even though an individual is accepted for a job, they face a hopeless future in which survival is an option involving compromised ethical integrity. That led to crime and violence. "I could gloat that I am not just any murderer, but one who killed his employer and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer" (p. 45). Balram accepts that it's a virtual murder with no regrets. Although one migrates from rural to urban for the socio-economic growth, they experience challenges and obstacles as they are new to city life or urban life.

On account of the fact that he too was from the Darkness – he had, of course, guessed my origin at once – the driver with the diseased lips gave me a course on how to survive Delhi and make sure I wasn't sent back to the Darkness on the top of the buses. (p. 124)

Adjusting to a new culture and social environment sometimes led them to be isolated in the city. "These poor bastards had come from the Darkness to Delhi to find some light - but they were still in the darkness" (p. 135). Leaving the rural Darkness, Balram overcomes caste and poverty constraints while struggling in the urban area, as even in Delhi's progressive spaces, inequality exists. "The main thing to know about Delhi is that the roads are good, and the people are bad" (p. 124). Adiga critiques how upward mobility fosters a dog-eat-dog mindset where ethics are secondary. "The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop" (p. 173). This quote depicts a society tapped into systemic oppression, where the individuals suffer injustices and exploitation even after they have migrated to a new urban city.

Conclusion

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* portrays the aspirational struggles and challenges faced by rural migrants in urban India. Through the story of Balram Halwai, the protagonist who migrates from rural Laxmangarh to urban Delhi, Adiga reveals the forced displacement and emphasises how caste, ethnicity, and social identities influence an individual's development. Adiga exposes the interplay of challenges and socio-economic aspirations endured by an ordinary man through his writings. "The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen" (Adiga, 2021, p. 27). The novel underscores the ruthless realities of caste oppression, deprivation, and the ethics of survival within a neoliberal development framework. The article demonstrates the multifaceted nature of migration and its depiction in South Asian narratives as it explores the depth of sacrifices, violence, suffering, pain, trauma, and resilience of an individual in reality. By examining the novel, the study highlights socio-economic factors that led one to transition from one place to another. The influence of globalisation on migrant labour also provides insights into exploring cultural disruption and the psychological aspects of migration. These sequences are connected to Balram's experiences in his identity development.

As a result, the analysis explores the intricate dynamics of migration, highlighting Everett Lee's Push-Pull theory and Ernst George Ravenstein's Laws of Migration as theoretical frameworks. These theories are particularly relevant to Adiga's novel, as they shed light on the various factors that lead to migration. Lee's push factors examine the situations that force an individual to leave their hometown, which can be seen in Balram's decision to leave his village due to economic hardship. In

contrast, the pull factors examine attraction that entices one to shift, which is opposite to the push factors. This can be seen in Balram's attraction to the city and the opportunities it offers. In addition, Ravenstein's migration laws demonstrate varied factors, including human migration patterns, which can be observed in the novel's portrayal of migration from rural to urban areas. Combining these theories examines an individual's journey from rural to urban and reflects on the socio-economic disparities that pressure them for transition. Ultimately, this research investigates the interconnected elements of internal migration, demonstrating both socio-economic aspirations and developmental challenges based on insights derived from the novel.

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