# Exploring the dilemmas of identity in modern Indian society in the context of globalisation taking *The White Tiger* as an example

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***Abstract:*** *The Indian realist drama film The White Tiger (2021) tells the story of Balram, a man from a poor Indian village who uses his wits and cunning to escape poverty through a self-referential narrative involving poverty, calculation and violence, exposing the problems of modern Indian society and the individual's loss of self-identity in the pursuit of freedom. This essay will examine The White Tiger through the theoretical framework of globalisation. Through a review of the development of globalisation in modern Indian society and an analysis of the metaphors of 'the rooster coop', 'the white tiger' and 'half-baked' in the film, it will further critically analyse the dilemma of identity in modern Indian society and attempt to expose the problems India faces in the process of decolonisation, globalisation and modernisation through this film.*

***Keywords:*** *The White Tiger; Globalisation; Indian Society; Identity*

## 1. Introduction

As a country with a history of almost two hundred years of colonial rule, India, like other countries and regions with similar colonial experiences, faces identity confusion and anxiety at the level of social consciousness. Under the double whammy of colonial history and globalisation, the people of India today have ambivalent and complex feelings towards the colonial powers and Western foreign cultures generally. As postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha points out, the complexity of colonial relations leads to ambivalence in emotional patterns, manifested in 'an instinctive yearning and admiration by the colonised for the modernity and authority brought about by colonial culture, and a corresponding sense of contempt and even disgust for their civilisation [1].' Indian film, as an essential medium for the reproduction and transmission of Indian culture, carries and constructs Indian identity in the present. Particularly in the new century and in the context of globalisation, thanks to rapid economic development and the government's strong support, Indian realist cinema has expanded to explore social realities; these films are also, to some extent, the instrument of India's ideological resistance to colonial rule and the achievement of national independence.

*The White Tiger* (2021) tells the Balmain's story of fighting poverty. Many critics acclaimed the film, and at the 93rd Academy Awards, *The White Tiger* was nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay. As the world changes and the narrative of globalisation unfolds, a problem becomes inescapable: 'the framework for analysing the dual identities of social individuals in multi-ethnic states is torn apart, and identity anxiety becomes a real situation for social individuals in the real world'. So, how can one escape the dilemma of individual identity in the process of globalisation? This essay will examine The White Tiger through the theoretical framework of globalisation and attempt to expose the problems India faces in the process of decolonisation, globalisation and modernisation through this film.

Additionally, the film mirrors Balram's growing experience with Indian society, highlighting the dual misunderstanding of individuals and nations on the road to modernisation, which has special significance for countries in the Third World. In the era of globalisation, how to make peace with traditions and foreign cultures and choose a development path that is self-consistent with civilisation is also a question that many third world countries must face and think about in their process of modernisation. This study will also provide some lessons for the cultural representation of film in formerly semi-colonised Third World countries, with a degree of relevance.

## 2. Literature Review

In the article 'Globalisation or Glocalisation?', the American sociologist Roland Robertson defines 'globalisation' as follows: 'Globalisation, in its most general sense, is both a compression of the world as a whole, involving connections between regions and an increase in the consciousness of a whole [2].' In this context, the 'compression of the world' refers to the evolution of the concept of space and time brought about by the rapid development of technologies such as transport and information dissemination. On the other hand, 'the increase in consciousness of the whole' refers to the increase in the organisation of the world as a whole due to the transnational flow of capital, goods, human resources and information [3]. At the same time, Chawla promotes the idea that globalisation is not a fully autonomous force and that it has been historically shaped, encouraged and discouraged by broader currents of international relations. Thus, globalisation is in line with historical trends, it is objective and inevitable, and almost all countries have been voluntarily or passively swept up in this wave of it.

However, the impact of the globalisation wave has made the cultural environment in which individuals live complex and diverse. Giddens notes that 'the development of globalised social relations has the potential both to weaken some aspects of national feeling associated with the nation-state (or state) and to enhance more localised nationalist sentiments [4]'. Indeed, in the view of Nancy Fraser [5], a feminist exponent of American neo-Marxism, the principles of justice confined to the nation-state are no longer adequate in the face of globalisation, which has led to an intensification of ethnic conflicts and identity issues. Fraser further asserts that 'in the West and throughout the world today, the broadest demands for equality in modern history are being made and the most diverse new forms of social protest movements have emerged: people of colour, women, minorities, ecologists, LGBT, peasants, etc. The energy of social forces scattered around the margins is fiercely unleashed. New social movements of all forms are emerging, and almost everyone is demanding equal recognition [5].' Undoubtedly, in a context of globalisation that tends to be closely interconnected and interrelated, recognising and respecting differential identities is an essential prerequisite for the move towards global justice and union. Meanwhile, as Swyngedouw stresses, since globalisation is a twofold process, the frenzy of identity politics on the grounds of recognition of differences such as race, ethnicity, religion and especially religious fundamentalism is also creating a new crisis of global peace and stability [6]. It is unsurprising that, against this background, many geographical tensions, conflicts and struggles have arisen in various parts of the world.

In the era of globalization, identity is seen as a significant source of contention. According to Peter's definition of the term, 'identity represents a person's understanding of who he is and his essential characteristics as a human being, a self-affirmation of his identity, and contains distinct value judgments and value expectations [7]'. There is no doubt that globalisation has provided a stage for presenting various identities and a public space for their manifestation. Significantly, Desai in his study of identity in new English-language Indian cinema, notes that new English-language Indian cinema expresses the nationalist claims of a dominant but non-hegemonic class in India that is struggling to establish its own public image and identity [8]. Additionally, Wright reveals in his analysis of Bollywood and postmodern Indian cinema that, in addition to the micro perspective of the conflict between family conceptions and individual discourses, new century Indian realist cinema also focuses on the macro perspective of the current realities and topics in Indian society [9]. The traditional Indian caste system, the religious system and even the present-day education system have become narrative themes and objects of criticism in the new century Indian realist cinema. However, Wright further shows that the negative response of these realist films in identifying with and pandering to the images created by the colonial culture has also led many Indians into a dilemma of self-identity [9].

Research on the topic of globalisation and identity has been performed in academia in the past, and it should be noted that many results have been obtained. However, as *The White Tiger* is a recently released film, few studies have focused on the identity dilemma in the film. This essay argues that identity in the context of globalisation cannot be limited to the shaping of abstract civic identity, nor can it be limited to cultural identity alone. A deep analysis of the root causes of identity distortion and injustice in all areas of politics, economy and culture within the scope of globalisation is needed to find a possible path to solve the dilemma of identity in globalisation.

## 3. Identity Dilemma in *The White Tiger*

### 3.1. The Rooster Coop: An inescapable trap in India's modernisation process

Balram, the protagonist of *The White Tiger*, was born in rural India during the New India era, when the socialist elite, having assumed state power, transplanted western-style democracy to Indian society to create a new, modern India. Scenes of democratic elections proliferate in the film, with slogans and banners posted everywhere that presents themselves as glorious symbols of the new India.

Some of the slogans in this film extolling democracy and freedom stir hope for social mobility for people like Balram, who have lived at the bottom of the social ladder. Ashok, the son of a landlord who has returned from his studies in America, tells his wife, Pinky, with extreme optimism, 'At this rate of dramatic change in India now, in ten years, it will be just like America.'

However, Naidu's study indicates that while Indian society is changing dramatically following the many changes that globalisation and modernisation have brought to Indian culture, they have also led to displacement, commodification and modern-day slavery in Asia, particularly in India [10]. Thus, rather than bringing prosperity to modern India, Western democracy has been reduced to a new form of repression under the strictures of India's traditional caste system. Jodhka also points out that the caste system, as a mode of political organisation in traditional Indian society, was from the beginning profoundly religiously prescriptive and that the subsequent ruling class has used the religious prescriptive implications to maintain and strengthen its own rule, leading to the entrenchment of social stratification in Indian society [11]. Balram metaphorically refers to this entrenched system of caste and class as a rooster coop in the film. Caste makes him a slave and imbues him with a slave-like nature that leaves him with no sense of resistance, while class, which is defined by social wealth, makes him powerless to resist.

In the film, the director's close-up shots of the roosters in the coop visualise how the roosters do not realise that this fate will befall them even when they know that their companions are being slaughtered. Balram says that India's most incredible creation is the rooster coop, which exists to hold those roosters, and by living in it for so long, the roosters lose the desire to escape; they are numb and never know to wake up, which is the case for most people in India.

Thus, under the profound influence of the 'rooster coop' system, the fate of Indians has not changed at all, and modern Indian democracy has gradually fallen into the mire of ineffective democracy. Moreover, the 'rooster coop' system has eroded the health of modern Indian society, distorted the normal psychology of the people and ultimately caused them to doubt their identity. In the film, the Socialist Party representative and her officials are not only embroiled in corruption and other crimes after winning the election, but they also can change and manipulate people's destiny at will, plunging the lower castes, who believed they could protect their rights through fair elections, into a deeper disaster. However, all because the system has been transformed into a new form of oppression, a trap from which modern Indian society cannot escape.

### 3.2. The Jungle: The misguided pursuit of freedom in the context of globalisation in India

In the film, the director metaphorically portrays Balram's experience as that of a white tiger growing up to become the king of the jungle. Balram prides himself on being a successful rebel, and indeed, he does break out of his cage, transforming himself from a low-caste servant into a successful entrepreneur. However, the tiger always eats the man, and there is blood and violence behind Balram's rebellion and search for freedom. The search for freedom is twisted into violence, and in it, the truth about individual freedom in the context of India's globalisation is presented.

Zala maintains that globalisation is unlikely to be a good thing as far as the Third World is concerned, as it does not fundamentally address the substantive issues of social and political change [12]. As with the 'rooster coop' system, the fundamental law of jungle society remains that the weak are more potent than the strong, but with the establishment of modern democracy in India and the influence of globalisation, violence no longer appears as over intimidation and threats, but rather as the silent presence of the powerful and the vulnerable.

There are two clips in the film that allude to the white tiger, both of which prompt the awakening of Balram's sense of freedom. In one, a teacher tells Balram that he is the white tiger because white tigers are exceptionally rare and only one will appear among his peers; he is telling Balram that he is exceptional and that the only way out of his circumstances is to study. However, due to his family's poverty, Balram is put to work in a tea shop. In another clip, Balram takes his nephew to the zoo to see the exceptionally

rare white tiger. Through flashback clips, he looks at the white tiger and thinks back to his past. Balram is awakened to the dark state of modern Indian society and thus sets out on a quest for freedom in his fear.

A rooster in a coop does not escape its destiny; the 'one generation only' white tiger stands in the jungle. Balram becomes a white tiger, establishing his law of the jungle: after killing his master, Ashok, he goes to India's Silicon Valley with a tremendous amount of cash, bribes the police like his former master did and started his own taxi company. Nevertheless, when he tells his subordinates about his nightmares and how the only way to escape the rooster coop was to kill his master, there is an implication that the moment the white tiger discovers the beauty of the world and ceases to be a slave, that tiger is locked in a coop, just like the rooster; while the law of the jungle can turn a servant into a master, it can also make the master fall into slavery again.

Young argues that the liberal concept of universal citizenship does not achieve substantive equality but instead creates new forms of oppression and subjugation [13]. She also claims that 'liberalism's attempt to treat citizens without distinction, although significantly more progressive than hierarchical status systems, actually obscures the differences between individuals and traps them in universal oppression [13]'. On the one hand, because of his insistence on fulfilling his desires, Balram's rebellion is often ridiculous in the film: spitting in the back seat of his master's car while wiping it clean, despising Ashok's words and actions while being full of respect for him. On the other hand, his quest for freedom is at the level of animal instincts. He will slave away at the Stork's feet to become a driver, and he will do anything to escape from his master and family to achieve his goal by devouring Ashok's life and money, all of which are the regression and alienation of the individual driven by liberalism. Thus, Balram's ultimate transformation consists of satisfying his desires and improving his status, with no logical insight or preference, resulting in his liberation becoming unrealised and full of paradoxes and distortions. However, all this points to one problem: the excessive liberalisation of the West does not solve India's problems. Liberalism does not remove poverty but introduces dissipation and corrupts the human heart.

### 3.3. The half-baked: The loss of identity of the individual and the nation

Balram's story unfolds as a self-telling, and his evaluation of himself is always in a state of dichotomy. On the one hand, Balram is a self-proclaimed thinker and entrepreneur; on the other hand, he is not insightful enough to say that he is just one of the millions of 'half-baked' people in India who are 'ignorant, half-formed and half-correct' about everything. It is clear that Balram's upbringing is a true reflection of the modernisation process of Indian society and shows the lack of confidence in the process of modernisation and globalisation in India.

Despite the rhetoric that surrounds liberal democracy, it is difficult for it to take root in Indian society because of the country's system of hierarchical repression. People are satisfied with symbolic slogans and propaganda without understanding the true meaning of liberal democracy, which inevitably has dangerous consequences. For those from lower castes, liberal democracy is merely a means of releasing them from their 'rooster coop' captivity into a 'jungle' society, where the law of existence remains the same as the law of the jungle. Similarly, for those from the higher castes, liberal democracy is a means of maintaining their status and position.

Compared to his father and brother, Ashok, deeply imbued with Western culture, is tolerant and open-minded and showed genuine pride in India's liberal democracy. Although he considers bribing opposition officials, which is a disgrace to democracy, he is still involved in the illegal activities of his family business, enriching himself by hiring corrupt officials and selling liberal democracy as a business and 'profit'. Ashok does so because of his deep-rooted sense of hierarchy and privilege. Ashok's two extremes of values, a dichotomy that also reflects his doubts about his self-identity, also reveal another classic form of 'half-baked' modern Indian society.

The extreme duality of modern Indian culture echoes the term 'half-baked'. Taylor concludes that the lack of recognition by others or only distorted recognition can be harmful and a form of oppression [14]. In moving towards globalisation and modernisation, the Indian nationalist elites have followed the colonial way of control; India's modernisation is nothing more than a repetition and expansion of the path of colonialism. Without absolute freedom and democracy, people cannot live autonomously and with self-discipline and are unable to escape their immaturity, often drifting between different ideas and forms of life and inevitably ending up as 'half-baked' people. Furthermore, in repressive power relations, people can only see each other in hierarchical relations. The only purpose of life is to gain or maintain superiority, which provides a convenient door for the weak to eat the strong. This phenomenon causes people to fight

with each other and isolate various ideas from each other, which eventually leads to the coexistence of the old and the new in the modern Indian political order and the 'half-baked' phenomenon.

## 4. Conclusions

Balram's experience is that of a poor, somewhat dark and morbid child becoming a successful entrepreneur. From a rooster in a coop to a white tiger with 'only one creature in a generation', Balram undoubtedly deconstructs the caste system that has been placed upon him and reverses a hierarchical life that no one has ever resisted – from servant to master, from unconscious to spontaneous and from spontaneous to conscious to consciousness, a process that is long, difficult and adventurous.

When visual culture flourishes, the construction of national and individual identity relies more on the audio-visual coding of film. The identity anxieties presented in Indian films are a symptom of the latent colonial 'aftermath', the shadow of colonial culture, in the consciousness of Indian society in the historical context of globalisation. Like Balram, the deliberate avoidance of and lack of confidence in one's historical traditions is the root cause of the disorientation of Indian modernity.

Therefore, to achieve equality and recognition for minorities in globalisation, it is necessary to open up a global vision of world history. Only in this way can individual people break away from the limitations of their society and class and relate to the material and spiritual production of the world and realise their own identity. At the same time, third world countries are also active participants in the process of globalisation. In the face of the new world situation, film and television productions can only truly build cultural confidence that is grounded in the local context, face up to history and find a balance between national and individual identity.

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