

**Navigating the Darkness: A Comparative Analysis of Survivalist Ethics and  
Social Mobility in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and  
Vikas Swarup's *Q & A***

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**Abstract:**

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly engaged with the socio-economic transformations impelled by globalization and economic liberalization. While these developments have generated new opportunities for upward mobility, they have also intensified inequalities of class, education, and access to resources. Within this context, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2005) present compelling narratives of individuals who attempt to transcend poverty and social marginalization through contrasting ethical choices. Although both protagonists aspire to improve their socio-economic status, they negotiate the relationship between destiny, survival, and morality in essentially different ways. This study adopts a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to examine how these novels redefine social mobility through the lenses of agency, structural inequality, and moral responsibility. By integrating literary analysis with sociological and postcolonial theories, the paper argues that destiny is not a predetermined force but a negotiated process shaped by individual choices within unequal social structures.

Existing scholarship on *The White Tiger* has largely focused on themes such as corruption, class conflict, globalization, and entrepreneurial success, while studies on *Q & A* have primarily examined destiny, popular culture, and experiential learning. However, there has been comparatively little research that brings these two novels into discussions through the interconnected concepts of destiny, survival, social mobility, and moral compromise. Moreover, the ethical implications of upward mobility in contemporary Indian texts remain insufficiently explored from a comparative theoretical perspective. Despite the prevalence of a number of articles on the books chosen for the present study, not many of them seem to address issues of destiny, survival, social mobility, and moral negotiation directly. There are fewer attempts found available unravelling such areas. The present study examines the representation of destiny, survival, and social mobility in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*

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Nandi, Swaralipi in a research dissertation, titled, ‘Narrating the New India: Globalization and Marginality in Post-Millennium Indian Anglophone Novels’ mentions about three distinct themes of Indian novels: social upward mobility, remodeling of the Indian cities, and environmental rights. Also, it is noted that this work studies the reflection of these three themes on fictional characters representing marginalized sections of the Indian society. In a research article, "Narrative Ambiguity and the Neoliberal Bildungsroman in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." Nandi, Swaralipi says that *The White Tiger* wavers between sincere victim testimony reaching resolution through the protagonist's stellar success and an unreliable narration laden with frivolity and sarcasm often in a manner of self-deprecation. The scholar interprets the novel as a complex conflict between individualism and community, manifest in the anxious tones of the narrative voice, and ultimately resolved when the protagonist assumes the role of capitalism's social avatar.

Barbara Korte is one of the few critics who discusses both novels together in her research work, “Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*”. She focuses on how the two texts give ‘voice’ to the poor and on their global market appeal as poverty narratives. However, she does not examine the contrasting ethical trajectories of the protagonists or the dynamic negotiation between structural constraint and moral choice. While Barbara Korte offers a valuable comparative reading of the two novels in terms of poverty representation and subaltern voice, her analysis does not address the fundamentally different moral strategies through which Balram and Ram negotiate social mobility as aimed by the present study.

Ana Cristina Mendes in “Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*” examines how Adiga constructs an ‘exotic dark India’ and critiques the novel’s representation of poverty and violence. She has productively examined the exoticisation of poverty and the ethical ambiguities of Balram’s rise. The present study builds on this foundation by introducing a comparative lens that juxtaposes Balram’s moral compromise with Ram Mohammad Thomas’s ethical perseverance, proposing *Navigating the Darkness* as a new interpretative framework.

Dr. CR Sunitha’s article “From Slum to System: Urban Violence and the Power Structure in Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A*” analyzes how the protagonist of Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A* utilizes neoliberal ideals like risk-taking and individual rationality to overcome social marginalization. It argues that while globalization offers new opportunities for upward mobility, systemic corruption and social prejudices continue to restrict those living on the fringes of Indian society. Ultimately, the paper explores how commercialized reality television and "knowledge capital" have become modern tools for the poor to achieve social status and economic success in post-liberalized India.

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Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* (2005) offer compelling explorations of the relationship between destiny, morality, and social mobility in contemporary India. This article examines how the protagonists, Balram Halwai and Ram Mohammad Thomas, negotiate the constraints of poverty and social inequality through contrasting ethical choices. While both the characters rise from extreme deprivation to achieve upward social mobility, their paths differ significantly. Balram embraces violence, deception, and moral transgression as necessary instruments for escaping systemic oppression, whereas Ram attains success through resilience, ethical perseverance, and the cumulative wisdom gained from his lived experiences. By comparing these two protagonists, the study argues that contemporary Indian society offers limited opportunities for the marginalized, forcing individuals to negotiate destiny through different forms of agency. The novels reveal that although both protagonists challenge predetermined social hierarchies, they embody fundamentally different conceptions of survival: one through moral compromise and rebellion, the other through integrity and perseverance. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that social mobility in contemporary India is shaped not merely by destiny but by the complex interplay of individual agency, structural inequality, and ethical choice.

This research article argues that social mobility in contemporary India is neither the inevitable outcome of destiny nor the exclusive product of individual merit. Rather, it emerges through the complex interaction between structural inequality, individual agency, and moral negotiation. Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital, Anthony Giddens' concept of agency, and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, the study demonstrates that Balram Halwai and Ram Mohammad Thomas negotiate structural deprivation through contrasting ethical choices that redefine the relationship between survival, morality, and social advancement.

Both the novels chosen for the present study foreground poverty as the central social condition shaping human destiny. Adiga and Swarup portray modern India as a nation sharply divided between the privileged elite and the economically marginalized. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai is born into an impoverished family in the village of Laxmangarh, where poverty deprives him of education and condemns him to child labour. Reflecting on his interrupted schooling, Balram remarks: "Me and thousands of others in this country like me are half-baked because we were never allowed to complete our schooling" (*The White Tiger*, p.10). This observation illustrates how poverty systematically denies educational opportunities and perpetuates social inequality. Balram's father, a rickshaw puller, embodies the physical consequences of lifelong deprivation. Adiga poignantly captures this reality through the statement: "The story of a poor man's life is written on his body" (*The White Tiger*, p.27).

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Balam's childhood is characterised by hunger, exploitation, and servitude. The feudal landlords exercise absolute authority over the villagers, compelling them to display complete submission. As Balam recalls: "If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers" (*The White Tiger*, p.25). Adiga exposes through these incidents the deeply entrenched structures of class oppression that define rural India. Against this backdrop, destiny becomes the central ideological question confronting Balam. Is an individual permanently imprisoned by fate? or can destiny be transformed through personal action? Balam rejects the notion of predetermined destiny and believes that freedom must be grabbed, even through violence. His declaration, "The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave," (*The White Tiger*, p.29) signals his rejection of inherited social identity and his determination to construct his own future.

Balam, realising that legitimate attempts cannot guarantee him upward mobility within a deeply unequal society, he concludes that criminal action offers the only viable escape. His moment of self-realisation is expressed in the metaphor: "I was looking for the key for years. But the door was always open." (*The White Tiger*, p.41). The "door" symbolises liberation from the social prison that Adiga describes as the "Rooster Coop." Balam's decision to murder Ashok, his employer, represents both an act of liberation and an ethical transgression. His subsequent declaration, "I am tomorrow," (*The White Tiger*, p.43) symbolises his emergence as a self-made entrepreneur who consciously rejects conventional morality. Anthony Giddens' concept of agency illuminates Balam's rejection of structural determinism. Rather than accepting the social identity imposed upon him by caste and class, Balam consciously reconstructs himself through decisive action. His declaration, "I am tomorrow," (*The White Tiger*, p.43) signifies not merely personal ambition but an assertion of agency against institutional structures that perpetuate social immobility.

Balam further justifies his actions by asserting: "A man's past keeps growing, even when his future has come to a full stop... I will never say I made a mistake... it was all worthwhile to know... what it means not to be a servant." (*The White Tiger*, p.50). For Balam, freedom outweighs ethical responsibility. Consequently, Adiga presents social mobility as an outcome of calculated moral compromise rather than honest labour. Balam's philosophy is encapsulated in his assertion: "A man who has no morals is a free man." (*The White Tiger*, p.52). This provocative statement illustrates the novel's critique of a society in which ethical behaviour often becomes a privilege available only to those who are already economically secure. Adiga portrays upward mobility not as the reward for merit but as the consequence of rebellion against an exploitative social order. Balam's rise from the "Darkness" of rural poverty to urban entrepreneurship exposes the moral cost of survival in an unequal society.

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Balram's impoverished upbringing deprives him as stated, not only of economic capital but also of cultural capital, particularly education and social recognition. His habitus is shaped by generations of servitude within the feudal order, making upward mobility appear structurally impossible. Consequently, murder becomes, in Balram's perception, an alternative strategy for accumulating economic and symbolic capital that the existing social order refuses to grant him legitimately.

Amartya Sen argues that poverty represents the deprivation of substantive freedoms rather than merely low income. Balram's inability to complete his education, choose his occupation, or determine his future reflects a profound deprivation of capabilities. His criminal act, therefore, can be interpreted as a distorted attempt to reclaim freedom systematically denied by the society.

Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*, in contrast, presents a more optimistic yet equally critical perspective on destiny and social mobility. The novel narrates the extraordinary journey of Ram Mohammad Thomas, an orphan who unexpectedly wins the television quiz programme 'Who Will Win a Billion?'. Despite answering every question correctly, Ram is immediately accused of cheating because his impoverished background makes his success appear implausible. His ironic observation, "I have been arrested for winning a quiz show" (*Q & A*, p.11), reveals the deep-seated social prejudice that associates intelligence and success exclusively with the privileged classes. Ram further observes: "The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. We are supposed to use only our hands and legs" (*Q & A*, p.12). This statement exposes the ideological assumptions that confine the poor to manual labour while denying them intellectual agency. When questioned about his success, Ram challenges these assumptions by declaring: "Well, Madam, we poor can also ask questions and demand answers. And I bet you, if the poor conducted a quiz, the rich wouldn't be able to answer a single question." (*Q & A*, p.16)

Unlike institutional knowledge, Ram's wisdom originates from lived experience. Each answer in the quiz is connected to an incident from his own life, demonstrating that experience itself constitutes a valuable form of knowledge. Swarup presents destiny not merely as chance but as the cumulative outcome of compassion, resilience, and moral action. Following Ram's arrest, the unexpected arrival of lawyer Smita Shah appears miraculous to him. He remarks: "One does not question a miracle" (*Q & A*, p.16). Later, it is revealed that Smita is Gudiya, the young girl whom Ram had rescued years earlier from domestic abuse. Her return to defend him illustrates the principle of moral reciprocity, suggesting that acts of kindness ultimately shape one's destiny.

Throughout the novel, Ram survives by undertaking numerous temporary occupations. As he explains: "I have been a waiter, a servant, a delivery boy, a guide, a barman and many other things." (*Q & A*, p.18). Rather than limiting him, these diverse

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experiences equip him with the practical knowledge necessary to answer the quiz questions. Swarup thus transforms precarious labour into a source of intellectual empowerment. Ram's eventual success is therefore neither accidental nor miraculous but the cumulative result of perseverance and experiential learning. At another point, Ram reflects: "For the first time in my life, I saw something new reflected in the eyes that saw me. Respect... with money you can have power over the minds of others." Q & A, p.21) This insight reveals the uncomfortable reality that social respect in contemporary India is frequently determined by economic status rather than personal integrity. Although Ram recognises the moral ambiguities of society, he consistently refuses to abandon his ethical principles. Reflecting upon human nature, he observes: "Appearances can be deceptive and the dividing line between good and bad is very thin indeed." Q & A, p.25). This statement acknowledges that poverty often compels individuals to confront ethically complex situations. Nevertheless, unlike Balram, Ram never embraces violence or criminality as the means of achieving success. Instead, he demonstrates that resilience, compassion, and accumulated life experience can also facilitate social mobility. As Sen argues that development means expanding people's capabilities and freedom, Ram expands his capabilities. He learns languages, practical skills, emotional intelligence, social awareness, confidence and problem-solving. Ram's social mobility seems to have a good connection to Sen's argument that development consists in expanding substantive freedom rather than merely increasing income. Although materially deprived, Ram continually enlarges his capabilities through work, observation, and human relationships. His eventual success reflects the cumulative development of these capabilities rather than inherited privilege or institutional support.

A significant symbol reinforcing Ram's philosophy is the two-headed coin that he secretly uses while making important decisions. Although others interpret his choices as matters of luck or destiny, Ram eventually reveals that the coin possesses two identical sides. The revelation symbolises his conviction that individuals ultimately possess the power to shape their own destinies through conscious choice rather than passive dependence on fate.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital extends beyond formal education to include knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through social experience. Ram Mohammad Thomas possesses little institutionalized cultural capital because he is denied schooling; nevertheless, his varied occupations as a waiter, guide, servant, barman, and delivery boy enable him to accumulate embodied cultural capital. His success in the quiz competition demonstrates that experiential knowledge can function as an alternative form of cultural capital capable of challenging elite assumptions about intelligence and merit.

Thus, this research article demonstrates that destiny functions neither as an immutable force nor as an entirely individual achievement. Rather, it is socially constructed through unequal access to resources, opportunities, and institutional recognition. Balram employs violence to accumulate economic and symbolic capital denied by the existing social

order, whereas Ram gradually transforms experiential knowledge into cultural capital without abandoning ethical responsibility. Both the novels reveal that social mobility in contemporary India is less a question of fate than of negotiating the complex intersections of agency, morality, and structural constraint.

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