

A Shift in Cultural Paradigm as portrayed in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract: *The contemporary Indian English novels revolve around the socio-cultural themes. They catch the glimpse of the ideologies and behaviours that is developed by the present generation. Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize winning novel The White Tiger is the record of a sharp and glaring look at modern day India. Adiga debunks the age-old division between the rich and the poor, existing caste system, corruption in Indian politics and the miraculous economic growth in India. Adiga's The White Tiger was born in some utterly impoverished Indian rural area where development and democracy are still part of oblivion. The world where he is born is not the India illuminated with the bright lamps of development and democracy but lies deep in the dark dungeons of corruption, inequality and poverty. Adiga clearly expresses the disparity exist in the country as haves and have-nots. Hence this paper focuses to throw the light on the socio-cultural shift made by the protagonist. Also it subtly touches the east-west encounters through the plot of this novel. Thus, the paper will analyse the socio-cultural and economic condition of India with all its complexities.*

Key words: *injustice, power, rights, rural, social,*

I. Introduction

Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the winner of Man Booker Prize for fiction in the year 2008. Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the record of a sharp and glaring look at modern day India. The narrator cum antihero of this novel, Balram Halwai, is an uneducated young man. By lying, betraying and using his sharp intelligence, Balram makes his ascent into the heady heights of Bangalore's big business. The novel is a series of letters written in seven nights to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabo. Wen is poised to visit India to the secret of success of Indian entrepreneurs. So Balram presumes to tell him how to win power and influence people in modern India.

Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver for his village's wealthiest man, two house Pomeranians, and the rich man's [very unlucky] son. From behind the wheel of their Honda City car, Balram's new world is a revelation. While his peers flip through the pages of murder weekly, barter for girls, drink liquor, and perpetuate the great rooster coop of Indian society, Balram watches his employer's bribe foreign ministers for tax breaks, barter for girls, drink liquor, and play their own role in the rooster coop. Balram learns how to tap gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell Johnnie walker black label bottles. He also finds a way out of the coop that no one else inside it can perceive.

Balram's eyes penetrate India as few outsiders can: the cockroaches and the call centers; the prostitutes and the worshippers; the ancient and internet cultures; the water buffalo and, trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is [almost] impossible. And with a charisma as undeniable as it is unexpected, Balram teaches us that religion doesn't create virtue, and money does not solve every problem -- but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and you can get what you want out of life if you eavesdrop on the right conversations.

Adiga's *The White Tiger* was born in some utterly impoverished Indian rural area where development and democracy are still part of oblivion. The world where he is born is not the India illuminated with the bright lamps of development and democracy but lies deep in the dark dungeons of corruption, inequality and poverty. His brief time at local school earns him his nick name "the white tiger" and real name Balram Halwai. He is pulled out of school into child labour so that he can help his family make both ends meet. His India is devoid of any fundamental right, with no medical facilities, and it is a place where elections are openly rigged and brutal atrocities of landlords are dominant. Throughout the narrative he calls his village as a world of darkness and he becomes more and more determined to escape out of the dark as he helplessly watches his father die of tuberculosis in his arms. His desire to learn makes him to eavesdrop and gradually he manages to become a driver, and incidentally he finds work in the home of his vicious land lord. Luck, lands him out of the darkness into illuminated city of Delhi.

India is invariably presented as a place of brutal injustice and sordid corruption, one in which the poor are always dispossessed and victimized by their age-old enemies, the rich. Balram gives the readers an instance that the rich people hire their servants only after getting the complete details not only of the person who works

but about his entire family and their background. Because the rich always have a sense of peril that they might be kidnapped by the naxals. Despite this callous condition, the servants in India remain loyal and work with full servitude. Balram says that a handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9% into strong, talented, intelligent persons in every way to exist in perpetual servitude. What Balram calls the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. He bluntly says that unlike China, India does not have a dictatorship or secret police to keep its people grimly achieving economic goals.

Adiga uses the image of the rooster coop to describe the Indian scenario. Balram, deliberates over the fact that in India millions of people are involved in various jobs ranging from delivering furniture and carrying back the cash payment in thousands for the master, driving cars and seeing or handling a lot of money, sometimes in millions, for their masters; carrying suitcases full of cut diamonds for their masters. And the people engaged in these jobs as servants never think of running away with the merchandise, which may be worth of their year or two years of salary or perhaps a steal which could last them throughout their miserable lives. The reason why this is so because 99.9% of people are caught in a rooster coop situation:

Go to Delhi, behind Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chicken there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space...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. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (The White Tiger 173-174)

Prathiba Nagpal in her article "Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger: A Critical Response" says that Adiga takes away the "last vestibule of dignity-their honesty, from these sad people existing on the periphery and attributes their situation to their conditioning." (156) They "exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you put the key of his emancipation in a man's hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse." (The White Tiger 176) The servants' life is more a slave's life in India. Capital possesses the power of controlling the labour. It is capital that forces a man to be a slave. Sometimes a man does not wish to be in the coop but he becomes a victim of circumstances that compel him to be in. Balram has to work as a bonded labour not because he has done something but simply because his family took a loan for the wedding and failed to repay. All the members of the family work for the stork family in return of the loan. He has to leave the school for "working in a tea shop. Smashing coals. Wiping tables" (The White Tiger 38).

When Balram becomes a driver, he does not ask for money because for him his master and mistress are like his "father and mother" and he cannot ask for money from his parents until they give. A driver is not expected to perform the job of driver alone in a rich family. When another servant is absent he has to perform his job too along with his. Balram though being a driver, cooks, massages his masters, sweeps the lawn etc. He proves himself that he is a loyal servant to his masters. When he wears the uniform of the driver the pride and pleasure that he takes is immense. When Pinky Madam leaves him behind, he does not show his anger but rather makes her believe that he is not so angry and can never be so because "employers are like father and mother". It is the desire to be a servant that has penetrated deeply into him.

It is the capital that makes all the differences. It makes a poor culture and creates an inferiority complex among the poor. Balram living in the village is not taught to lead a decent life and cultured life. Pinky Madam makes fun of him and tells him that he is not a man but an uncivilized monkey. He scratches his groin and never brushes his teeth because his father never taught these things. He states: "Why had my father never told me not to scratch my groin? Why had my father never taught me to brush in milky foam? Why had he raised me to live like an animal? Why do all the poor live in such filth, such ugliness?" (The White Tiger 151)

It is the capital responsible for creating economic inequalities. A man with capital is a human being; otherwise his life is no better than an animal. A poor man in sandals is not allowed to enter a mall because he is not treated as human being. Balram is a different man and knows the way to tackle such a situation. He makes up his mind to enter the mall but as a driver he cannot enter and so takes a new, white T-shirt, wears it and enters the mall through the rear entrance. But, as long he is there, he tastes "the fugitive life". Poverty itself becomes a rooster coop that makes man lead the life of a slave. Balram is at times humiliated to the core by his masters. Once when Mr. Ashok and Mukesh bribed and returned home, Mukesh unknowingly dropped a one rupee coin inside the car. He made Balram to search for it thoroughly inside the car which is mysteriously missing. Finally Balram took a coin from his pocket and dropped it in the floor and returned it replacing that missing coin. This is the plight of a loyal servant in India.

The poor class is not only expected to serve the rich people, they should also be ready to lay their lives for the sake of rich. Pinky drives the car after getting drunk and kills a street child in Delhi road. This incident shows the value of a poor's life. "What are these children doing, walking about Delhi at one in the morning, with no one to look after them?" (The White Tiger 164) asks Mr. Ashok. Balram replies: "...you know how those people in the darkness are: they have eight, nine, ten children-sometimes they don't know the names of their

own children. Her parents- if they're even here in Delhi, if they even know where she is tonight-won't go to the police."(The White Tiger 164)

Then comes a shudder to Balram. Mukesh and Ashok want Balram to surrender himself for the accident done by Pinky. They have even made Kusum, Balram's granny, to witness the forced crime that is done by Balram.

The working class of India is more and more suppressed in the name of globalisation. On the one side people stand still without a penny and on the other side people stand still not knowing the way to spend their pennies. Ashok Mitra in his book *The Nowhere Nation* says that, Globalisation has embraced the developing nations like India, the result of which is that the rich are becoming richer and the poor poorer. Humanitarian approach has lost its way in the jungle of materialism. Mall culture welcomes a rich man, not a poor man. Politicians, the so-called people's representatives welcome the rich who bribe them inside their office and make the poor people, who voted them, stand outside. (126)

Balram Halwai, the protagonist of *The White Tiger*, has been a victim from his young age due to his penniless condition. Due to his poverty, Balram lived a clean life being loyal and working hard for his masters. All the good qualities of Indian working class are found in Balram. The irony is that his good qualities didn't take him anywhere rather it made him suffer and finally to become a pervert. Money determines a person to be good or bad at certain conditions in one's life.

The effect of money in a poor man's as well as rich man's mind is shown plainly in this novel. The need of money makes Balram a crooked and the greed for money makes Ashok(Balram's master) lose his life. Economic well being is important in one's life but the problem begins when a man starts to value more than anything in his life. The poor man's tragedy lies in the fact that he has to continue living in pathetic conditions to which he tries to adjust without thinking of changing them. He lives in the hope that one day his shackles of living in a tradition ridden society will break and he will experience real freedom. Unfortunately independence does not come easily to him and he has either to lose his life or kill others in frustration. This novel is a confession by the central character Balram. He describes his crossing of all sorts of hurdles to achieve his dream.

Poverty results in dishonesty, bribery, corruption and immoral behaviour. The lack of money turns everyone bad in this novel. Adiga gives the readers many instances in this novel how human beings react to the devoid condition of money. After coming to Bangalore, he performs the last rites for the family members so that they may not come in his dreams. He prays for all his aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces and even the water buffalo. He imagines the soul of his brother Kishan and granny Kusum and prays to let him live in peace. The story of the murder of 17 members of the family in a north Indian village makes him throw the newspaper in such disgust that he stops reading the newspaper for a few months after that. He doesn't wish to live with the burden and hence severs himself from his family by performing the last rite. Simmi Gurwara says in his article, "Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Study in Social Criticism" that "He is a white tiger who neither has a family nor friendship because it will not be safe for him from the point of view of his position of being the boss. He is a real entrepreneur who does not have the word 'sentiment' in his dictionary." (168)

The salary that Mr. Ashok gives is not adequate for Balram to live in a city. It also provokes to kill his master. The two puddles that come to life are the two images of his personality that clash because of the opposite opinions. Mr. Ashok gives him a hundred-rupee note while earlier he takes out a one-thousand rupee note and asks Balram that he will take the responsibility of the expenditure of his marriage. Balram becomes possessive and thinks that the master can do anything in his life. He thinks that these masters still "own them and their body , soul and arse"(The White Tiger 163). He becomes conscious of the injustice and exploitation done to the poor. Then he makes up his mind to kill his master and steal the red bag full of money.

In Bangalore, Balram finds the flare in outsourcing and plans to be associated with it. But the idea of outsourcing is not from his mind. It is from Mr. Ashok. When Uma (Ashok's mistress) finds Mr. Ashok upset, he tells her that he wants to do something else. "Something clean. Like outsourcing"(The White Tiger 210). When he hears about Bangalore and outsourcing done there, he plans to be there. Balram in Bangalore is not Balram Halwai, he is Ashok Sharma, north Indian entrepreneur settled in Bangalore. "He has written the new word 'entrepreneur' on the slate of his destiny erasing the earlier written words 'a sweet-maker'"(Madhavi Nikham, "Face to Face with Reality: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" 76). He hires a Toyota Qualis, earns money and soon becomes the master of many Qualis vehicles. "once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers"(The White Tiger 302)

II. Conclusion

Balram, *The White Tiger*, has neither friends nor sentiments. He is tagged as "working class hero"(The White Tiger 264). The ways that he adopts are wrong and lead a man nowhere. But, the tiger cannot be caged breaks the law of his land in order to "turn bad news into good news"(The White Tiger 38).

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