

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Socio –Political Study of Poverty and Injustice

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize winning debut novel *The White Tiger* is sharp, fascinating, attacks poverty and injustice. *The White Tiger* is a ground breaking Indian novel. Aravind Adiga speaks of suppression and exploitation of various sections of Indian society. Mainly a story of Balram, a young boy's journey from rags to riches, Darkness to Light transforming from a village teashop boy into a Bangalore entrepreneur. This paper deals with poverty and injustice. The paper analyses Balram's capability to overcome the adversities and cruel realities. The pathetic condition of poor people try to make both ends meet. The novel mirrors the lives of poor in a realistic mode. *The White Tiger* is a story about a man's journey for freedom. The protagonist Balram in this novel is a victim of injustice, inequality and poverty. He worked hard inspite of his low caste and overcame the social hindrance and become a successful entrepreneur. Through this novel Adiga portrays realistic and painful image of modern India. The novel exposes the anxieties of the oppressed.

Keywords: Fascinating, poverty, injustice, adversities, anxieties, oppressed

The White Tiger delivers a dark side of India's class struggle through the narration of Balram Halwai, a village boy. Adiga says his novel attempts to hear the voice of the men you meet in each and every corner you travel through India - the voice of the downtrodden. According to Adiga, the need for *The White Tiger* was to catch the unheard voice of people from "the Darkness". India's economic growth is continuously increasing day by day. But the situations of poor people are just the same. This is the main theme of Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* which has won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2008. According to Adiga most of the poor people hail from Bihar, Bangladesh and Nepal. They get low paid jobs like drivers, domestic help, cook, construction workers, gardeners and as fulltime servants and always take care of all the needs of their masters. Adiga's *The White Tiger* mainly emphasizes on the difficulties faced by poor people who are living under severe poverty condition. As Adiga explained in *The White Tiger*,

"These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh...The slum ended in an open sewer – a small river of black water went sluggishly past me, bubbles sparkling in it and ...Two children were splashing about in the black water" (260).

Balram Halwai who is the protagonist in Adiga's novel is depicting the true picture of Indian society, he is such a servant from Bihar. He is re-counting his whole voyage from a small village named Laxmangarh in Bihar to the IT city Bangalore. He is an intelligent but poor boy who has to discontinue his studies due to poverty and family circumstances and he was nick named by a school inspector as The White Tiger, Balram gets a job as a driver for a corrupted business man Ashok at Delhi. So many times he was humiliated by his master and his family. In spite of that, they tried to frame Balram as a murderer, for that he was asked to

sign a declaration declaring that he has killed a child while driving. Actually Pinky Ashok's wife killed a child while driving in a drunken stage. This pressures him to kill his master and escape with the money of his boss that was held for bribing a politician. He finds no other way to make him safe. He then started a taxi company at Bangalore and became a successful prosperous entrepreneur. Here the author displays the attitude of the protagonist is like The White Tiger which is different from other animals and is dangerous too. Balram wants to live a independent life, like The White Tiger, he is dangerous too.

India is the world's greatest democracy, but still the poor are in the same situation. They don't have freedom and power to do what they like. The main focus of Adiga's novel, though India is a developing country the poor are still under the poverty line. As he puts in *The White Tiger*,

"These are the three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera, and election fever. The last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in" (Adiga 99).

In an interview Adiga's remark about Indian politics is as follows:

"The fact that a lot of Indians have very little political freedom, especially in the north of India. That elections are rigged in large parts of the north Indian state of

Bihar, and they're also accompanied by violence. There's like thirtyfive killings during every election. If you were a poor man you'd have to pick China over India any day because your kids have a better chance of being nourished if you're poor. Your wife is more likely to survive childbirth. You're likely to live longer. There are so many ways in which India's system fails horribly" (Sawhney 2008).

This captivating work attacks injustice, poverty and inequality without being sentimental. The novel intensely epitomizes the spreading void between the rich and the poor. On the one side, the rich shop in malls, stay in extravagant apartments while on the other side,

the poor shop in grimy areas, resides in basements, lives in slums. He is in real sense a voice of slum dwellers, poor peasants and exploited class. Poor people migrate to cities for their better life. Aravind Adiga's description of Rooster Coop is a real representation of what happens in India. He says that there is a chicken market where hundreds of roosters are mercilessly killed every day the area behind Jama Masjid in Old Delhi. They can see that they will be the next yet they don't rebel. They accept their fortune the way it's designed for them. It exposes their and vulnerability and helplessness. The same is done to the humans. In the same way poor peasants have to suffer the depravities of feudal lords. The narrator sarcastically states this rich and poor divide, in these lines:

“...In this country, we have two kinds of men: Indian liquor men and English liquor men. ‘Indian’ liquor is for village boys like me- toddy, arrack, country hooch. ‘English’ liquor, naturally, is for the rich. Rum, whisky, beer, gin-anything the English left behind.” (The White Tiger, p 73)

In explaining the Rooster Coop, Balram states the devotion of servants and their controlled perception:

“Every day, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffer is driving an empty car with a black suitcase sitting on the backseat. Inside the suitcase is a million, two million rupees; more money than the chauffer will see in his lifetime. If he took the money he could go to America, Australia, anywhere, and start a new life Yet he takes that suitcase where his master wants.” (The White Tiger, p 174)

He then throws light to the common behavior of all rich or the upper class people who exploit the poor and ill treat them. He has a sharp urge to break out the traditional boundaries and live a respectful life. He thinks that one has to take risk in life to break this coop:

“...only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed –hunted, beaten, and burned alive by masters – can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature (The White Tiger, pp. 175-7).

The Police may not even register a case against rich and let them free on the payment of some bribe. On the other hand a poor person will be behind bars for no reason. The following lines well expresses this thought:

“A man on bicycle getting killed- the police even do not have to register a case. A man on motorbike getting killed-they would have to register that. A man in a car getting killed- they would have thrown me in the jail.” (The White Tiger, p 309)

The White Tiger attacks on economic disparities, class struggle, injustice, poverty and inequalities. It is the story of a poor rickshawallah’s move from the ‘darkness’ of rural India to the ‘light’ of urban Gurgaon. In this novel, Aravind Adiga tells the appalling, terrible story of a young man who cruelly murders his employer and gets away with it:

“The White Tiger follows a darkly comic Bangalore driver through the poverty and corruption of modern India’s caste society – a narrative genius with a mischief and personality all its own. Amoral, irreverent, deeply endearing, and utterly contemporary, this novel is an international publishing sensation – and a startling, provocative debut”. (Amazon.com review)

Many poor Indians are left perplexed and confused by the new Indian that is being shaped around them. Author of the novel, Aravind Adiga in an interview with the BBC, said:

“The White Tiger is the story of a poor man in today’s India, one of the many hundreds of millions who belong to the vast Indian under class; people who live as labourers, as servants, as chauffeurs and who by and large do not get represented in Indian entertainment, in Indian films, in Indian books. My hero-or rather my Protagonist-Balram Halwai is one of these faceless millions of poor Indians”. (2008. Aravind Adiga in an interview with BBC)

Aravind Adiga in Tehelka Magazine talks about The White Tiger and how he gets the idea of rickshaw pullers in the novel:

“In 2006, I quit my job with TIME magazine, and spent the first few weeks of the year trying to finish a novel that was tentatively called The White Tiger. I gave up by March. The novel was going nowhere; I was restless. I went to Kolkata by train. It was meant to be a holiday, but I knew no one in the city and after a day, I was bored. I was too used to being a journalist: I called an NGO and asked if there was anything to cover. “The government wants to ban the hand pulled rickshaws of the city so that industrialists will feel comfortable investing here,” the spokesperson said. “Would you meet one of the rickshaw-pullers and present their point of view in an article?”²²⁴ The man from the NGO took me to meet a group of rickshaw pullers. There were nearly 20 of them, all from Bihar, living in a large, dingy shed.

One rickshaw-puller, as if reading my thoughts, seized me by the wrist and took me around the shed, showing me the brooms, and explaining that there was a twice-a-day schedule of sweeping and mopping. “We are clean people, sir,” he said. “And good people. I am a Muslim, but I live here with Hindus, and there is no trouble. We have separate kitchens, and we respect each other”. (From Tehelka Magazine, Vol 5, Issue 38, Dated Sept 27, 2008)

Balam outlooks the whole country like a zoo, in which everyone has his own limitations and boundaries. Ultimately it were these boundaries which kept our nation civilized, but with the dawn of independence these boundaries were pulled down, In 1947 when the Britishers left “only a moron would think that we became free then”. Our nation did not become an independent state but in spite of that became a jungle –

“See this country, in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation was like a zoo. ... And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on fifteenth of August 1947, the day the Britishers left- the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law”. (63, The White Tiger)

“And now the whole nation was not being ruled by leaders but the ferocious embodiments of corruption who preyed on lesser meek animals. The Stork collected taxes (without any legal powers) from the fishermen and boaters. The wild Boar ruled (without any kingship) over agricultural lands, the buffalo owns (without buying) the rickshaws and the Raven charges (without right) the goatherds. Balram was himself nicknamed the white tiger by an inspecting officer, who was impressed by his knowledge. And his master Ashok was tagged by him as the Lamb only because he returned from America a humble and sensitive human. It must be acknowledged that Adiga remains true to the jungle law in his work as ultimately the tiger (Balram) devours the lamb (Ashok). Indeed through the mouthpiece of Balram he eloquently puts forth his philosophy- “Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence”. (237, The White Tiger)

When Pinky, Ashok’s wife was drunk during driving runs over a pavement and kills the poor child, Balram is trapped and compelled to own the crime. Balram was pressured to sign a statement accepting the responsibility for the accident:

“TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,

I, Balram Hawai, son of Vikram Halwai, of

Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement of my own free will and intention:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects, on the night of January 23rd of this year...I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one” (168).

His employer’s family forced him to sign the statement .“You’re part of the family. “My heart filled up with pride. I crouched on the floor, happy as a dog, and waited for him to say it again” (166). Besides, his old grandmother is made a witness to the confession as well.

Masters mean behaviour continue when they order the servants about does and don'ts. Balram is told never to play music and switch on the AC when he is alone. Ashok and Pinky Madam used to taunt Balram for his lack of an English education. When he mispronounced "Maal" for "mall", PiZZa for piJJA.

Adiga has successfully painted the subaltern issue in the novel. conveyed the idea that role of the underclass is important in the story of India's progress. The novel is an outstanding social commentary on the poor rich divide in India. Balram depicts the downtrodden, oppressed sections of our society against the rich. Deirdre Donahue labels *The White Tiger* an angry novel about injustice and power which creates merciless thugs among whom only the ruthless can survive (Donahue, 2008). We can draw the conclusion that *The White Tiger* mirrors the realistic picture of contemporary India. In which issues of sub altern, downtrodden are still untouched. Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is really a story that attacks on poverty, injustice and inequality.

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