

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.1.24>

Socio-Economic Struggles in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Tarcitius Kerketta

Research Scholar,
Dr. C. V. Raman University,
Kota, Bilaspur (C.G.)

Dr. Om Prakash Tiwari

Associate Professor (English)
Dr. C. V. Raman University,
Kota, Bilaspur (C.G.)

Abstract

Balam Halwai the narrator of Arvind Adiga's first novel, *The White Tiger*, is a modern Indian hero. In the country inebriated by its new found economic prowess, he is a successful entrepreneur, a self-made, man who has risen on the back of India's much-vaunted technology industry. In a nation proudly and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow." Balam's triumphal narrative, framed somewhat inexplicably as a letter to the visiting Chinese premier, unfurls over seven days and nights in Bangalore. It's rather more complicated story than Balam initially lets on. Before moving to Bangalore, he was a driver for the week-willed son of a feudal landlord. One rainy day in Delhi, he crushed the skull of his employer and stole a bag containing a large amount of money, capital that financed his Bangalore taxi business. That business-ferrying technology workers to and from their jobs- depends, in turn, on keeping the police happy with the occasional bribe.

Keywords: Corruption, Emergence, Raj Literature, Feudalism, Injustice

The winner of the Man Booker Prize (2008) for his debut novel *The White Tiger*, 33 year old Arvind Adiga is a journalist and author by profession who is an Australian citizen of Indian origin. His debut novel, *The White Tiger* won the Man Booker prize of 2008. Born in the year 1974 in Madras, present day Chennai, Adiga grew up in Magalore and received his basic education at Canara High School and at St. Aloysius High School from where he graduated out with a SSLC degree in 1990. He studied at James Ruse Agricultural High School in Sydney, Australia where he and his family emigrated during the 90s. He further went to study English Literature at Columbia College, Columbia University in New York in the U.S. from where he graduated in the year 1997. Adiga's career in journalism begun as financial

journalism as in intern at Financial Times, Money and the Wall Street Journal. His area of coverage was the stock market and investment. He wrote a review on Peter Carey's book, the Booker Prize 1998, *Oscar and Lucinda*, which appeared in an online literary review called *The Second Circle*. He was eventually appointed by TIME where he worked as a South Asia correspondent for about three years before started freelancing. This was the time when he wrote *The White Tiger*. Adiga currently lives in Mumbai, India.

Winning the Man Booker Prize of 2008 for his debut novel, *The White Tiger* made Adiga the fourth Indian born author to win the prize after Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie and Kiran Desai. Adiga's novel is about "India of darkness" or the rural India and the "India of the light" or the urban Indian. It is about the protagonist Balram Halwai's imminent journey from "darkness" into "light". Keeping Balram's story in view, the novelist studies the antithesis between the rise of India as a modern global Economy where the rich zoom around in their egg-like shelled cars which only crack open to let a bejeweled hand of a lady to throw an empty mineral bottle into the street and all that Balram represents – the poorest section of rural India where life itself is smeared with dark and struggle-some reality right from one's birth to one's death

Adiga points out that it becomes significant for writers like him to feature remorseless injustices of Indian society especially during a time when India is undergoing great changes China presumably inheriting the legacy of the world from the west he makes it clear that his endeavor in doing so is not an assailment on the country instead it is about the greater process of self-examination

He further defends his point by elaborating on the fact that criticisms by writers like Flaubert Dickens and Balzac during the 19th century helped England France improve their ways becoming a better place to live in *Between the Assassinations* Adiga's second book featuring 12th short stories was released in India on the 1st of November 2008.

Arvind Adiga is fast establishing a reputation as the Soomom Grundy of contemporary novelists. Just as his Booker-winning debut *White Tiger* told the story of a particular week in the life of its murderous narrator, so *Between the Assassinations* takes seven days in the life of a fictional Indian city called Kittur, south of Goa and north of Calicut. The organizing principal is curtail-successive chapters are headed "Day Three (Afternoon)" and so on because without it the book would be just a loose collection of sketches of discrete lives.

The week in question takes place apparently in 1990, six years after the killing of Indira Gandhi, one year before the assassination of her son the architecture of the book-its title, a detailed chronology-suggests this timing is crucial, but the substance of it-apparently chaotic local events framed by singular lives-go to prove what seems to be Adiga's point, that major historical shifts are only faintly legible in the close-up reading of individual motivation.

It is Adiga's near-sightedness that brings his writing to life. His eye moves among the crowd with a restless precision, alert to the realities of each unmarkable existence. His subject is the everyday frustration brought about by discriminations of status, class and religion. He deftly evokes the particular challenges to the self esteem of the station porter, who believes himself a Pathan, or the 30 year old courier, bossed by a young Tamil. He can make you believe that this is exactly what it feels like to be inside the head of a man whose days are circumscribed by the following rule to be delivered was light, like mattress, he was not allowed to take a cycle-cart it had to be carried on his head ...he set off with the slow, light step, like a fat man jogging in a short while, the weight of a mattress had seemed unbearable is compressed his neck and spine and send shaft of pain down his back. He was virtually in a trance.

All of Adiga's characters have comparable burdens to bear, but mostly what the shoulder is the weight of history and the accident of their birth Shankara is a pupil at an elite Jesuit boys school; his father is a plastic surgeon in a Gulf, but he is lower-caste and made aware of that at every turn. When he explodes a homemade bomb in a Chemistry lesson, it is with the same intent, we are led to believe as the terrorists who undermine Indian "progress" but the effect is benign and comic, only serving to bring out the rage of a teacher who cannot separate his f's and p's speech and yells at his classroom, "You Puckers! You Puckers!"

This lightness characterizes much of life in Kittur, the citizens, particular the dispossessed, may see their lives in tragic terms, but Adiga's sense of a great Indian comedy is never far away. His limber structure allows him to shift in tone from devastating account of a pair of children sent out on the street to beg to service the crack habit of their father, who will do anything to escape the misery of labour on construction site, to a Just William kind of tale about class of people sent to view an educational film at a porn cinema, Angel Talkies. It is perhaps no surprise that Adiga emerged in the same year as *Slumdog Millionaire*: feel good deprivation is in the air.

Adiga's writing shows no interest in sub continental dazzle- the closest he gets into a magical realism is in an account of illiterate bootleg bookseller called The Xerox who inadvertently spread *The Satanic Verses*, banned by the authorities, across the city. He places his faith instead a minute observation of character, in reading the way in which India's million mutinies might be played out in every competing strand of DNA. Between *The Assassinations* is collection of linked short stories, not a novel, but it is a page-turner none the less.

As a parable of new India, then, Balram tale has a distinctly macabre twist. He is not (or not only) an entrepreneur but roguish criminal with a remarkable capacity of self justification. Likewise the background against which he operates is not just resurgent economy and nation but a landscape of corruption, inequality and poverty. In some of the book's more convincing passage, Balram describes his family life in "the Darkness," a region

deep in the heartland marketed by medieval hardship, where brutal landlord hold sway, children are pulled out of school in to indentured and elections are routinely bought and sold. This grim world is far removed from the glossy images of Bollywood stars and Technology entrepreneurs that have been displacing earlier (and an equally clichéd) Indian stereotype featuring yoga and spirituality. It is not a world that reach urban Indians like to see. Indeed when Adiga's book recently won the Man Booker prize, some of India lambasted it as a western conspiracy to deny the country's economic progress. Yet Digha Adiga isn't impressed by such nationalistic fervor. In bare unsentimental prose, he strips away the sheen of a self-congratulatory and reveal instead a country where the social compact is being stretched to the breaking point there is the much talk in this novel of revolution and insurrection: Balram even justifies his employers murder as an act of class warfare.

The White Tiger is a penetrating piece of social commentary, attuned to the inequalities that persist despite India new prosperity. It correctly identifies-and definite-middle-class India's collective euphoria. But Adiga a farmer correspondent for Time Magazine who lives in Mumbai, is less successful as a novelist; His detailed description of various vile aspects of Indian life are relentless- and ultimately a little monotonous. Every moment, it seem, is bleak, pervaded by "The darkness". Every scene, every phrase, is a blunt instrument, wielded to remind Adiga's reader of his country. His wife is caricatures of the insensitive upper classes, cruel to and remote from their employees. Although Balram himself is somewhat more interesting, his credulousness and naiveté often ring false. When he goes to buy alcohol for his employer, he finds himself dazzled by the sight of so much English liquor. When he visits a shopping mall, he is conscious of a perfume in the air, of golden light, of cool, air-conditioned air, of people in T-shirts and jeans.... I saw an elevator going up and down that seemed made of pure golden glass.

The problem with such scenes is not simply that they are overdone. In their surfeit of emblematic detail, they reduce the characters to symbols. There is an absence of human complexity in *The White Tiger* not just in its characters but, more problematically, in its depiction of a nation that is in reality caught somewhere between Adiga is vision and the shinier version he so clearly- and fittingly- derides. Lacking this more balanced perspective, the novel feels simplistic an effective polemic, perhaps, but an incomplete portrait of a nation and a people grappling with the ambiguities of modernity.

How do you get the nerve, I ask Arvind Adiga, to write a novel about the experiences of the Indian poor? After all, you are an enviably bright young thing, a middle-class, Madras-born, oxford- educated ex- Time magazine correspondent? How would you understand what your central character, the downtrodden, uneducated son of a rickshaw puller turned amoral entrepreneur and killer, is going through?

It is the morning after Adiga, 33, on the 50,000 Lira Man Booker award with his debut novel *The White Tiger*, which reportedly blew the socks off Michael Portillo, the chair

of judges, and more importantly, is already causing offence in Adiga is homeland for its defiantly unglamorous portrait of India is economic miracle. For a western reader, too Adiga novel is bracing there is an unremitting realism usually airbrushed from Indian films and novels. It makes Salman Rushdie's Booker-winning chronicle of post-Raj India. *Midnight's Children* (a book that Adiga recognizes as a powerful influence on his work), seem positively twee. The Indian tourist board must be livid.

Adiga, sipping tea in a central London boardroom, is upset by my question. Or as affronted as a man who has been exhausted by the demands of the unexpected win and the subsequent media hoopla can be. Guarded about his private life, he looks at me with tired eyes and says: "I don't think a novelist should just write about his own experience. Yes, I am the son of A doctor, yes, I had a rigorous formal education, but for me the challenge of a novelist is to write about people who aren't anything like me, On a shortlist that included several books written by people very much like their central characters (Philip Hensher, for example, writing about South Yorkshire suburbanites during the miners' strike, or Linda Grant Writing about a London writing exploring her Jewish heritage), the desire not to navel-gaze is surprising even refreshing

But isn't there a problem: Adiga might come across as a literary tourist ventriloquising others' suffering and stealing their miserable stories to fulfill his literary ambitions? Well, this is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about, rather than just hearing about the 5% of people in my country who are doing well. In somewhere like Bihar there will be no doctors in the hospital. In northern India politics is so corrupt that it makes a mockery of democracy. This is a country where the poor fear tuberculosis, which kills 1,000 Indians a day, but people like me-middle-class people with access to health services that are probably better than English's- don't fear it at all. It's an unglamorous disease, like so much of the things that the poor of India endure.

At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do-it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination."

That, though, makes Adiga's novel sound like funless didacticism. Thankfully – for all its failings (comparison with the accomplished sentences of Sebastian Barry's shortlisted *The Secret Scripture* could only be unfavourable) – *The White Tiger* is nothing like that. Instead, it has an engaging, gobby, megalomaniac, boss-killer of a narrator who reflects on his extraordinary rise from village teashop waiter to success as an entrepreneur in the alienated, post-industrial, call-centre hub of Bangalore.

Balram Halwai narrates his story through letters he writes, but doesn't send, to the Chinese premier, Wen Jaibao. Wen is posed to visit India to learn why it is so good at

producing entrepreneur, so Balram presumes to tell him how to win power and influence people in the modern India. Balram's story through is a tale of bribery, corruption, skullduggery, toxic traffic jams, theft and murder. Whether communist China can imports this business model is questionable. In any event, Balram tells his reader that the yellow and brown men will take over the world from the white. The man, who has become (and this is where Balram's analysis gets shaky effect through toleration of Homosexuality, too slim and physically weakened by overexposure to mobile phone.

Halwai has come from what Adiga call the Darkness the heart of rural India and manages to escape his family and poverty by becoming chauffeur to a landlord from his village, who goes to Dehli to bride government officials. Why did he make Halwai a chauffeur? "Because of the whole active-passive thing. The chauffeur is the servant but he is at least while he's driving , in change, soothe whole relationship is the subverted . "Disappointingly, Adiga only knows of the Hegelian master - slave dialectic from reading Nietzsche's Genealogy of moral. But that dialectic is the spine of the novel: the servant kills his master to achieve his freedom.

The White Tiger teems with indignities masquerading as employee duties Such Adiga maintain, is his India-even as Delhi rises like a more eastern Dubai, call- centres such suck young people and India experiences the pangs of urbanization that racked the west two centuries ago." Friends who came to India would always say to me it was a surprise that there was so little crime and that made me wonder why Balram supplies an answer: servitude." A handful of man in this country have trained the remaining 99.9% - as strong, as talented as intelligent in every way to exist in perpetual servitude." what Balram calls the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire India economy; unlike china, he reflects ,India doesn't need a dictatorship or secret police to keep its people to grimly achieving economy goals. "If we were in India now, there would be servants spending in the corners of this room and I would not notice them," say Adiga. "That is what my society is like, that is what the divide is like." Adiga conceived the novel when he was travelling in India and writing for Time magazine "I spent a lot of time hanging around stations and talking to Rickshaw pullers." What struck him was the physical difference between the poor and the rich "In India it's the rich who have problems with obesity. And the poor are darker- skinned because they work outside and often work without their tops on so you can see their ribs. But also their intelligence impressed me. What rickshaw pullers, especially, reminded me of was black Americans, in the sense that they are witty, acerbic, verbally skilled and utterly without illations about their rulers."

It is not surprising then that the greatest library influence on the book where three great African-American 20th century novelist Ralph Ellison James Baldwin and Richard Wright there wrote about race and class, while latter black writers focus on just class. Ellison's invisible Man was extremely important to me. That book was disliked by white and

blacks. My book too will cause widespread offence. Balram is my invisible man made visible. This right Tiger will break out of his cage.”

For Indian leaders one of the most upsetting parts of that break-out is that Halwai casts off his family. “This is a shameful and dislocating thing for an Indian to do” says Adiga. In India there has never been strong central political control, which is probably why the family is still so important. If you are rude to your mother in India it's a crime as bad as stealing would be here. But the family ties get broken or at least is stretched when anonymous, an-Indian city is like Bangalore draw people from the villages. These really are the new tensions of India but Indians don't think about them the middle classes especially think of themselves still as victims of Colonial rule. But there is no point any more in someone like me thinking of myself as a victim of you [Adiga has caused me not for the first time as a colonial oppressor]. India and China are too powerful to be controlled by the west any more.

We have got to get beyond that as Indian's and take responsibility for what is holding us back. What is holding India back? The corruption, lack of health services for the family is always the repository of good. (The White Tiger)

Our time is nearer nearly over. Adiga doesn't know how to will spend his prize money, is not even sure if there are safe Bank in which to deposit it. Doesn't hi fear attacks at home for his portrayal of India? After all, the greatest living Indian painter MF Husain lives in exile. “I am in a different position from Hussain. Fortunately, the political class doesn't read. He lives in exile because his message got through but my mine probably won't.”

Adiga, who says he has written his second novel but won't talk about it (“It might be complete crap so there's no point”), files home to Mumbai today to resume his behave life. His most pressing problem is that Mumbai landlords doesn't let flats to single man. Why? “They think we are more likely to be terrorists. I'd just like to say, through your pages that I am not. In fact, If you check the biographies of Indian terrorists you'll find your mostly family man who are well-off. It's a trend that needs to be investigated.

Arvind Adiga talks about the inspiration behind. *The White Tiger* congratulations on being long listed for the Man Booker prize 2008. Has the news sunk in yet? It's a great thrill to be long listed for the Booker especially alongside.

Amitabh Ghosh and Salman Rushdie But I live in Mumbai, where not many people know of the Man Booker prize; I'm still is standing in an long queues and standing in over-packed local trains in the morning and worrying about falling ill from unsafe drinking water. Life goes on as before. This is your first novel but you are known for your journalism. Has it been a smooth transition to literary fictions. (Adiga)

I've wanted to be novelist since I was a boy. I studied English literature a lot of Elizabethan drama at University and wanted to write a novel about India that would be vivid, political, and funny like the duchess of Malfi set in Delhi. While I was

figuring out how to do this journalism paid the bills- and also gave me a chance to travel through India (and the rest of South Asia) when you work for mainstream Publication even a very good one like TIME, there is a limit to what you can put into your stories; there is so much you observe that goes not into you official reporters diary but into another secret diary-which become *The White Tiger*. (Adiga)

What inspired you to write the white tiger?

The Novel begins as an experiment of a kind visitor of India from South Africa and Latin America often asked me why there seemed to be so little crime in India given the vast (and growing) disparity in wealth between that classes-a condition that had led too much higher level of crime in their countries. Why was it, I begin to wonder, that even do rich people in India keep so many servants and the servants have such regular and immediate access to their Master's households, that the servants in India, by and large, stay so honest? What keeps the class system in place and what are the conditions under which it might start to crumble? I begin to think of a servant in Delhi who would cold-bloodedly, steal from his master- and do something even worse to him. And imaging what that servant would think, and feel and do, I begin making notes that turned into his novel.

The White Tiger has been described as a new vision of India with one review were calling it's witty parable of India's changing society'.

How do you feel about that?

The White Tiger is not a political or social statement: it's a novel- meant to provoke and entertain its readers. The narrator is a tainted one; a murderer- and his views are certainly not mine. But there is something I'd like my readers to think about. I' am increasingly convinced that the servant- master system, the Bedrock of middle -class Indian life, is coming apart: and its unraveling will lead to greater crime and instability The Novel is a portrait of a society that is on the brink of unrest.

What made you choose to write an epistolary novel? What makes it work as a vehicle for this particular story?

This isn't an epistolary novel: there are real letter involved. The narrator is lying in his small room in Bangalore in the middle of the night, talking out aloud about the story of his life. It's a story he can never tell anyone-because it involves murder-in real life ; now he tells it when no one is around Like all Indians, who are obsessed (a colonial legacy, probably) with the outsider's gaze, he is stimulated to think about his country and society by the imminent arrival of a foreigner, and an important ne. So he talks about himself and his country in the solitude of his room.

What book have you read recently that you would recommend?

Catherine O'Flynn's What was Lost. I met the author briefly at an Oxford book festival this year and was struck by what a friendly and modest person she was. I had

no idea, until I got back to India, that she was a best-selling author and one of the most respected young British writers. I'm thinking now I should visit Birmingham something to find out if everyone there is as well behaved as Ms. O'Flynn.

The White Tiger is new type of novel which triggers its readers. The novelist has accepted its originality and sincerity of description.

References

- Adiga, Arvind. *The White Tiger: A Novel*. U.K. Atlantic Books, Ltd/Free Press, 2008.
- Adiga Arvind (18 October 2008). "Provocation is one of the legitimate goals of literature". The Indian Express (Interview). Interview with Vijay Rana. Revived 9 November 2013.
- Indian Australian novelist Arvind Adiga wins Booker prize-Express India Archived 17 January 2010 at website.