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The White Tiger : A Critique

Abstract: This work is a comprehensive study which brings out the narrative techniques used by Arvind Adiga who has a fascination for his past as a boy belonging to Chennai and feels a bond with the life of middle class people. His view of looking at history in an alternative way reflects in this work. He looks at violence as a channel for freedom and this view is realized in the form of the protagonist, Balram Halwai murdering his master Mr. Ashok. The novel is also a way of looking at India in its flux of economic changes as against China, the country of communism. Apart from sharing the view of the author, the work brings out the aspects of light and dark, casteism, rural and urban life, difference between Indian and American culture, Indian politics and corruption. It is also peppered with humour here and there. Every detail has been incorporated in narrating the transformation of a poor village boy into a successful entrepreneur.

Key Words: Cliffhanger, cultural difference, epistolary, light & dark, rooster coop, narrative hook, existentialism

It is one of the unique works of art by a lesser known Indian English writer, Arvind Adiga who was at once catapulted to the world of fame and glory by this novel which won him one of the most prestigious awards, the Man Booker Award. This work by Arvind Adiga is an amalgam of Indian arcadia and city life incorporating in it Indian politics, corruption, caste system and the journey of a poor village boy into becoming a successful entrepreneur.

It is written in discursive form and the writer addressing the Premier of China in all the chapters is the unique feature of this novel. There has been no such Indian novel which addresses the leader of any other country much less China. The narrator finds a similarity between the Premier of China and himself. The Chinese are great lovers of freedom and individual liberty and so is the narrator, Balram Halwai. He comes to know through AIR that Mr. Jiabao wants to know about Bangalore and entrepreneurs and so he gets ready to share

his own story with him, “I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore.” He believes, “... that the future of the world that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse ...” (5)

The humour created by the narrator is also a very striking feature of this novel. There is sustained humour in this work which tickles the readers and keeps them turning over the pages. He says, “I am no philosopher or poet, how would I know the truth? It’s true that all these gods seem to do awfully little work – much like our politicians – yet keep winning re-elections to their golden throne year after year.”

He belittles Hindu gods though at the same time, he follows the Hindu custom of praying to gods.

I guess, Your Excellency, that I too should start off by kissing some god’s arse.

Which god’s arse though? There are so many choices.

See, the Muslims have one god.

The Christians have three gods.

And we Hindus have 36,000,000 gods.

Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divine arses for me to choose from...

...So: I’m closing my eyes, folding my hands in a reverent *namaste* and praying to the gods to shine light on my dark story. (8 - 9)

The element of light and dark prevails most part of the story. The narrator presents himself as one from the dark world which is the world of poor, uneducated, filthy and uncivilized people and contrary to this is the world of rich, powerful and educated people. The rich dominate and rule, and the poor suffer; they are crushed. Their world admits no light, no hope. Here is the testimony to the view:

Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness ... Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness. (14)

The narrator opines that entrepreneurs are made from the half-baked clay whereas those who complete their education, take orders from their bosses for the rest of their life. He is all praise for the entrepreneurs like him who sneak out of the world of dark and make it to the world of light.

In the religious parlance, the writer's tone is sacrilegious and deprecating. He mocks even the Ganga or perhaps he is quite realistic in his approach to everything, not letting himself be overwhelmed by emotional gushes. He calls it "black river" and "river of death". He says, "No! – Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of feaces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids."(15)

The details are mentioned in such a picturesque and lucid manner that anybody can visualize them. The diction is also plain without any florid or pompous words. The writer has made no efforts to show his erudition. He has kept the language so simple that it goes straight into the heart of even a lesser reader. The narration is first person and the style is engaging with dialogues in between. The story uses internal focalization. The writer hasn't used multiple focalizers rather the only focalizer is Balram Halwai whose point of view we come across in the whole story.

The miserable state of Indian villages and schools has been vividly brought out. The squalor, lack of amenities, carelessness and irresponsibility of the teacher and all other features of a typical Indian village have been etched out in quite a cogent manner. He says that, " If the Indian village is a paradise, then the school is a paradise within a paradise." (32) The government had made arrangement of free lunch to the school children but the children were never given roti, daal or pickles. The reason was clear to all that the schoolteacher had stolen their lunch money. He had "legitimate excuse" for that as "he hadn't been paid his salary in six months."(33)

The evil of dowry, that how it comes down upon the family of the girl like the great charge of electricity, has been narrated in a very credible manner. Without dowry marriage becomes an impossible affair. One has to earn and store a lot throughout one's life to marry off a daughter. Even, people take loans which they are never able to repay and end up becoming slave to the moneylenders and lead their whole life in a miserable state. The following lines corroborate the idea:

My cousin-sister Reena hitched off to a boy in the next village. Because we were the girl's family, we were screwed. We had to give the boy a new bicycle and cash and a silver bracelet and arrange for a big wedding- which we did ...

... The family had taken a big loan from the Stork so they could have a lavish wedding and a lavish dowry for my cousin-sister. (36)

There is ample amount of suspense and thrill in the story. The first part ends on a cliffhanger compelling the reader's imagination to be on tenterhooks, "Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat. (42)

The first chapter paves the way for the other chapters. In the first chapter he talks about his family, village and especially about the four richest people of the village. Their names were synonymous to four animals (Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar, Raven) which was due to their habits. The animal imagery goes well in describing the coarse and callous ways of rich people. Even the title itself *The White Tiger* is an example of animal imagery and it suffices to give us a glimpse of what ensues in the novel. A white tiger is a rare species of tiger and Balram Halwai proves true to the title.

In the second chapter he talks about his ex-employer, Mr Ashok, his wife Pinky Madam and their strained relationship, and his first job experience at the tea shop at Laxmangarh, a small village and later in Dhanbad, a big city.

Children from poor families easily get into the mire of immorality and illicitness, in the absence of proper guidance and a guardian. The narrator was also pushed into the seamy side of life by the driver who taught him driving. He taught him to abuse other drivers to have an upper hand on them—"call him a sister-fucker a few times." The driver takes Balram to a brothel where he finds himself "gaping at all the gorgeous women jeering and taunting me from behind their grilled windows all of them begging me to dip my beak into them!" (57-8)

There is a bit of social commentary in the novel. It offers a different kind of nomenclature of the society in the form of men with big bellies and men with small bellies. When the narrator went to the Stork requesting to appoint him as a driver, he was asked his caste which was Halwai, sweet-maker. In India, the caste is one's destiny. Just by knowing the caste one can know everything about a person, especially, in the darkness. To sum this caste discussion up, he says, "...in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies

in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.

And only two destinies : eat—or get eaten up.’ (64)

The narrator moves in time and space, back and forth, from his childhood days to the present, and from his village to Dhanbad and to Bangalore. He begins the novel in the capacity of an entrepreneur and then dives into his childhood days in Laxmangarh and comes back again to describe his life as a driver at Stork’s house. The second chapter is totally devoted to his life as a driver at Stork’s house. The third chapter is a mix of his village life as a grown up boy and the city life as a driver. In the rest of the chapters as well he traverses between present and past.

The novel puts up a case for cultural difference between India and America and the pleasures that the women of high and educated society enjoy as compared to the women of uneducated lower class families. The women of higher societies are free to live their life the way they want, devoid of any restrictions of family or social bonds etc. But on the other hand the women who belong to a lower class family have no freedom at all. She leads a wretched life, full of restrictions, social and familial ties and responsibilities so much so that there remain no space and time for themselves. In the novel under study Pinky Madam represents a free woman who wore dresses as she liked and lived as per her whims and fancies. She played badminton with Rampersad, the driver. She wore trousers and Balram gaped because, “Who had seen a woman dressed in trousers before—except in the movies?...” (75-6) She always had her say and finally when she could not stand the life in India any longer, she left for America, breaking her relationship with Mr. Ashok.

The novel offers a comparison between the civic sensibility of people of America and India. The people in America seem to have a good civic sense. Rules are strict and people follow rules whereas in India, people seem to enjoy breaking rules. The following dialogue proves a testimony to this fact—“Pinky that was New York- you can’t drive in India, just look at the traffic. No one follows any rules- people run across the road like crazy-- look-- look at that—“ (81)

Family ties are valued a lot among small people at small places. They are close knit and love is in prominence. When Balram is delayed in meeting his family members, Mr.

Ashok defends him thus—“Have a heart, Pinky. He was seeing his family. You know how close they are to their families in the darkness.” (88)

The narrator takes a dig at the democratic foolery in India that how for the sake of votes and dirty politics even the minors are made adults and their names are added to the voters' list. People are even bought and sold during election. It was during election time Balram got his date of birth. Though he was a minor at that time yet the government officer took him down as a boy of eighteen saying, “I think you're eighteen. I think you turned eighteen today. You just forgot, didn't you?” He says, “I had to be eighteen ... the legal age to vote. There was an election coming up, and the tea shop owner had already sold us.” (96 - 7)

In the dirty quagmire of Indian politics, it is only the public who are fooled about; the politicians always have their axes to grind. If anybody with a bit of self-esteem tries to raise his voice against the injustice or the prevalent corruption, the voice is suppressed and the person is crushed to death. Once, during elections, one of Balram's father's colleagues was obsessed with casting his vote. He went up to the booth shouting. When people gathered to see all that's happening, police charged at them and drove them away. Later the people came to know that “Vijay and the policeman had knocked the rickshaw-puller down ... they hit him with their sticks ... they took turns ... after a while the body of the rickshaw-puller stopped wriggling and fighting back but they kept stamping on him until he had been stamped back into the earth.” (102)

The dichotomy of the rich and poor also has found a strong ground in this novel. Most of the social systems and the-then social framework upheld and criticized by the socialists and the communists were believed to be ceased to exist largely in the annals of the post-colonial world but the ground reality is something different. All the social evils are still there but not without some modifications. The rich become richer and the poor become poorer; the evils continue with new culprits, new victims, new methods, new solutions etc. The Great Socialist wins the election and Vijay, the bus conductor rises to hold a position of prominence but the condition of the poor remains the same and the rich play in the hands of the politicians.

The writer has made good use of the technique of cliffhanger. Every chapter ends with an element of suspense and curiosity in the minds of the readers and they look forward to the details in the following chapters. From the third chapter onwards the writer avoids the introductory remarks.

The chandelier functions as a symbol of richness and light. It shows the protagonist's obsession with light and also the trait of light to create an illusion which removes all darkness and filth and mire in it. The chandelier helps Balram to cut himself off from his poor, wretched, helpless and criminal past and gloat in the glory of present. It is a kind of refuge which keeps his fear in check. Escaping from darkness, he hides himself in the light—

Why not? I've got no family any more. All I've got is chandeliers.

I have chandelier here, above my head in my office, and then I have two in my apartment in Raj Mahal Villas Phase Two. One in the drawing room, and a small one in the toilet two. It must be only toilet in Bangalore with a chandelier! ...

It makes me happy to see a chandelier. Why not, I'm a free man, let me buy all the chandeliers I want. For one thing, they keep the lizards away from this room ...

Sometimes in my apartment, I turn on both chandeliers, and then lie down amid all that light, and I just start laughing. A man in hiding, yet he's surrounded by chandeliers!

There—I am revealing the secret to a successful escape. The police searched for me in darkness: but I hid myself in light. (117-8)

Apart from dark and negative there is a positive side of Balram Halwai as well. He is not a hardcore criminal. He has a heart that feels for others. He always feels guilty of the crime that he has committed. He was the son of a poor hardworking rickshaw-puller who wanted him to study and have a good life but the circumstances and the company of evil people turned him into one such man. The driver who taught him driving introduced him to a brothel and his colleagues drew him further deep in the world of corruption by involving him in immoral talks and offering him magazines like Murder Weekly which was full of murder, rape and revenge. It issues a strong contention for the belief that the poor and downtrodden section of the society is easily drawn towards corrupt practices.

Examples of corruption can be found at every level from top to bottom in Indian democracy and bureaucracy. It has eaten up the very apparatus of governance but it is no surprise because money driven societies tend to be corrupt. The school where Balram studied, was once supplied with uniforms but they never saw those uniforms and “a week later they

turned up for sale in the neighbouring village". (33) The following excerpt is another testimony to the stated belief—

The scam is this, Country-Mouse. Foreign wine is very expensive in Delhi, because it's taxed. But the embassies get it in for free. They are supposed to drink their wine, but they sell it on the black market. (127)

The novel also presents the miserable state of the servants under the high-handed feudal lords of India. They are treated in a heartless manner as if they are no human beings. When Buffalo's infant son was tortured and killed by the naxals, he got the domestic servant shot dead who was supposed to guard the son as the Buffalo suspected the servant behind this. Not only this, the Buffalo killed his granny, brother, aunt, nephews and nieces also. Such is the fate of servants in India. They are given no rights rather crushed under the burden of work. Though Balram was appointed as a driver to Stork but he had to do household work as well when he would not be driving because as per the landlords a servant should not be let free. The following pieces pose a perfect example to the claim made above—

... But in India—or, at least, in the Darkness—the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers and tailors. They simply have servants.

What I mean is anytime I was not driving the car, I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a long brooms or chase a cow out of the compound. (68)

It has often been noticed that the poor become an easy victim of the cynicism and the wrongs of the rich. When Pinky Madam killed a child while driving the car, it was Balram who was made the culprit if the matter came to light. Salman Khan, the Bollywood Superstar was an accuse in a hit and run case but went scot-free.

The symbol of Rooster Coop has been perfectly used by the writer to show the Indian mentality of servitude. The servants know their fate that they will be butchered like roosters by their master but they never rebel. They very honestly follow their masters doing all what they can do till their last breath. People remain indebted to even a small act of kindness for ages, never even thinking to come out of that bond. According the author, the rooster coop works in India as this servitude is considered as a matter of pride and glory. The repository of love and sacrifice make it happen. Another reason for this rooster coop to continue is, people love their family and nobody is prepared to see his family hunted, beaten and burnt alive by

their masters. Moreover, the rooster coop is protected from within. The other servants don't want and don't let any of them to be an innovator, experimenter or entrepreneur.

Money and freedom makes an easy prey of a man. If a man has no limitations or if there is nobody who could hold the rein of his life, any man can go astray. After Pinky Madam's departure, Mr. Ashok was free. There was nobody to check his comings and goings. He could roam about as he wished. Though he was an upright person but money and loneliness made him fall into the clutches of a depraved man and thus he was corrupted.

The story also tells us that how growing into a sinful world tells on an innocent person. As one grows up in this wicked and crooked world, the sinister flames around, burn him black with evil and bad habits. His innocence is all washed away and he becomes a man fit to live in this world. Balram was a very innocent boy in the beginning but as he grew up, the world taught him all the tricks and tantrums and he became a successful entrepreneur with his hands stained with crime.

The story begins with a narrative hook to keep the reader's attention focused right from the beginning. The inclusion of the Chinese Premier Mr. Jiabao in the manner of discourse works well for it.

In rhetorical parlance, the novel has a perfect blend of logos, ethos and pathos. The writer's polemics suffices to justify Balram's transformation into a criminal and then into an entrepreneur. In addition, the emotional and moral elements have also been suffused in a parallel vein.

To talk about other dimensions of the novel, it has existential undertone. The protagonist Balram Halwai presents strong existential character. Existential approach lies not in what life has to offer rather making our own choices, changing our decisions to incorporate new things and erasing the outdated ones by taking up cudgels against all odds. The protagonist of this novel embodies all the existential elements and especially he lives the Sartrean philosophy of "existence precedes the essence." After he left Laxmangarh, his life went his way. First he worked at some hotels and then he decided to learn driving and even sought a job at Stork's house. He made his own right and wrong. He killed his master, escaped to Bangalore and started his own business.

His life proves the Kierkegaardian notion of "Truth is subjective." He found his own truth and proved that. He didn't succumb to the pressure of his family rather he chose his own

way. Instead of letting things happen to him, he made things happen as he wished. His choice of freedom and rebellion epitomizes Dostoevsky's idea of "freedom and rebellion."

An existentialist has a rational view of life. He doesn't take God as a problem-solver rather he believes that the solution of the problem lies within himself. In this novel though Balram prays to God yet he doesn't lay everything in the hands of God rather he finds his own way.

According to the Kierkegaardian notion of aesthetic and ethical existentialism, Balram is not immoral rather he fails to play the ethical game. He doesn't set up ethical standards of right or wrong rather whatever he does, he takes that to be right. Balram is the true representative of aesthetic life as pontificated by Kierkegaard. He is indifferent to the past as repentance or the future as obligation rather he lives in the present. He is also an epitome of "individual freedom" as espoused by Karl Jaspers.

In toto, *The White Tiger* is a beautiful reading experience with a proper and perfect blend of humour, suspense, tight plot, a very different of addressing the leader of a country and varied narrative elements. It's a joy finding these beauties in a work. Even a lesser reader can enjoy it as the writer has not experimented with new coinages or complex structures. It goes straight into the reader's mind and heart.

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