

**Balram Halwai and the White Tiger: Aravind Adiga's tribute to
the Aspirational Indian of Present Times**

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Abstract:

The White Tiger depicts the aspirational Indian and his mentality even as he is surrounded by caste, corruption, inequalities, illiteracy; even as he is imprisoned by circumstances beyond his control. There have been several Indian writers who have dwelt on the culture, ethos and the quintessential nature of being Indian like Nirad C Chaudhari's "Autobiography of an Unknown Indian", R.K Narayan's numerous masterpieces, Vikram Seth's "Bachelor Boy". We have, Raja Rao's novel "The Serpent and The Rope", depicting the very Indian protagonist Rama, aspirational and seeking spiritual connect. However, Aravind Adiga's Balram Halwai in the "White Tiger" is cast in a different mould. He is the brazenly aspirational new Indian emerging from the hinterlands and the backwaters of the country and whose time has come to be heard. He is born with survival instincts like all Indians but what sets him apart are his killer instincts and a strong urge to thrive under any circumstance.

Key words: aspirational, survival instinct, killer instinct, appearance and reality.

INTRODUCTION:

The White Tiger is a path breaking work published seven years ago but more relevant than ever in today's turbulent times. It is path breaking because of the honest and incisive image of India that the author Aravind Adiga projects. He has torn off the mask of appearance and exposed the reality of India. Against the dark looming shadow of a hypocritical polarized nation, emerges the figure of the aspirational Indian, Balram Halwai. "My book will cause

widespread offence-Balram is my invisible man made visible...This white Tiger will break out of his cage.” Adiga had stated in an interview.

THE TWO CASTES: THE RICH AND THE POOR

The novel exposes the darkness of rural India and the shallowness of urban India. Ironically, what bridges the gap is the old and familiar, vile but deeply entrenched caste system, rampant in rural India and covertly practiced in urban India. However, there are only two real castes in the White Tiger: the rich and the poor, the depiction of which brought much criticism from critics. He is accused of failing to see and acknowledge the vast swathe of the middle class. “Although it is the artistic liberty of a writer, whether he wishes to deal with other aspects of society or not, but if Adiga takes novel to be a vivid representation of India, then the bridge between the ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ filled with the middle class just cannot be avoided.....How can a work which does not mentions (sic) a major part of a country’s population be taken to be its realistic representation?” (Prateek Deswal 2014)

BALRAM HALWAI : THE WHITE TIGER

Notwithstanding the above criticism, there is no doubt that Adiga has succeeded in delineating the memorable character of Balram Halwai, who stands against the backdrop of a changing, new, entrepreneurial India. He is depicted as someone with tremendous aspirations- He is symbolic of millions in India who aspire for a better life and who are often discussed in the media. “Meanwhile the future of the aspirational millions is in serious jeopardy---The economy needs to accelerate by two percentage points to deliver the required jobsrural India too could aspire to the life style of urban India.” (Gurcharan Das, Sunday Times Of India. March 2016)

However, Balram is born with not only survival instincts but also a killer instinct which makes him the White Tiger that aspires to escape the trap of the rooster Coop, and find freedom from the subservient and servile mentality of the servant class. “Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave”. (41)

Balram instinctively realizes that his aspirations can be met by finding a good education. But this is denied to the large sections of the rural population. The scene where the inspector visits the school and Balram answers all the questions and the inspector calls him the white tiger and singles him out for a scholarship shows how Balram stands out as bright and sharp: “You young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals –the creature that comes along only once in

a generation?” Balram himself provides the answer “The white tiger”. “That’s what you are, in this jungle” (35).

It is established thus, that Balram is different in the world of ‘Darkness’ ‘where all good news soon becomes bad news.’(35) Soon enough, the boy who was to have got the scholarship promised by the school inspector finds himself breaking coals for the oven with his elder brother Kishen in a tea shop. He becomes a laughing stock among his less intelligent classmates.

A SLICE OF REAL INDIA

An epiphany in the novel occurs when Balram’s brother asks him “You are angry with me for taking you out of school, aren’t you?”(37) And Balram stubbornly says nothing. His brother had given up on his dreams and was bearing the burden of his family. However, Balram is made of sterner stuff. He was not about to throttle his aspirations for anyone. This is significant because it echoes the behavior and mindset of a vast number of downtrodden Indians struggling on the periphery in present day India, echoes of which can be found in the excerpt given below from a news item that appeared in the Times of India:

‘Education is the key to erasing our stigma,’ says cow-skinner, Ovindar Pal, M.A in Ancient History, who narrates a story stemming from the ‘injustices of civilization’ and who gave his children the tools to aspire- a good education... one thing that has always rankled Pal is how despite being the only M.A from his community in the whole of Bhagwatpura, the colony of animal skimmers and sweepers, he could not get a respectable job...education is something Pal, a voracious reader, goes every Sunday to Delhi’s Daryaganj market to buy books, doesn’t tire talking about. “I want my sons to crack the UPSE Exams... education empowers. It is the only thing that will wipe off the shame and subjugation we have suffered for centuries.” (Sunday, Times of India, August 15 2016). This could easily be Adiga’s Balram and his ambitions, but in fact he is a real person echoing Balram’s aspirations.

Even Balram, goes to Delhi’s second hand bookshops and buys books to enrich himself. He also quotes from the works of poets like Rumi and Mirza Ghalib and often likes to loiter around the bookstalls on the footpath, feeling happy to be surrounded by their influence and power.

He is the voice of the underclass (Krishna Singh, 2009) but he is also much more than this. He is someone who wishes to break through the glass ceiling of caste, clout and wealth. Balram is typically subservient to the needs of his master, but he is also watchful and

analytical about them. “The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy”... this is Balram’s observation or through him can be heard the voice of Adiga.

Thus Adiga depicts the reality of the Indian countryside. The scene when Balram’s mother’s corpse is being taken for cremation- ‘I don’t think she had ever had such a fine thing to wear in her life....Her death was so grand that I knew all at once, that her life must have been miserable.’ (16). His Laxmangarh stands for the miserable backwaters in the country that never find a mention in the tourist books. He satirically, through the persona of Balram refers to Lakshmgangarh as a ‘typical Indian village paradise’. He mentions children ‘too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India.’(20)

ASPIRING TO BE LIKE HIS MASTERS:

It is against this backdrop that Balram struggles to grapple with the two forces that prevent his dreams from emerging from the darkness. The two forces are his family and his master. Balram has to consciously revolt against the two, to escape the cage and rooster Coop and fulfill his aspirations. ‘ I wanted to be like Vijay –with a uniform, a pay cheque, a shiny whistle with a piercing sound, and people looking at me with eyes that said, How important he looks.’(31) His father too had aspirations... “My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine- at least –should live like a man.”(30)

The novel is replete with scenes that point out to Balram’s over riding wish to emulate the class and style of his masters. He sees Ashok, his master wearing a white T shirt with a small design in the centre. Balram then goes out to the local market and does not cease searching till the right T shirt is found. He also buys black shoes and ventures into a mall, half fearing that he will be stopped midway... ‘I was sure, until the last moment, that I would be caught, and called back, and slapped and humiliated there.’(151). But once inside the mall, Balram is taken in by the ‘perfume in the air’, ‘the golden light’, ‘cool air-conditioned air’ and Balram says ‘If only the other drivers could see me now!’(152)

Even as Balram dresses up like his master, he also desires golden haired women like the one who escorts his master. He carefully preserves the golden strand of hair that he finds on the leather seat of the car, and aspires to have a similar girl for himself. He searches for one and ends up with a golden haired woman after paying an exorbitant sum only to realize that she had dyed her hair blonde. And Balram feels infuriated as well as humiliated.

THE SYMBOLIC REVOLT AGAINST THE FAMILY:

Balram's family is the force against which he struggles to escape and the figure of Kusum, the matriarch, stands as a symbol of all that is oppressive in the Indian family system which again is the trap from which the rooster has to escape.

Balram is tolerant of his grandmother Kusum's tantrums and machinations but recognizes her manipulative, parasitic hold, from which he eventually breaks free by refusing to marry and settle down and also running away to the city. Balram's rejection of his grandma's chicken curry is actually his symbolic revolt against his family and their exploitation...this is a typical Indian reality. He refuses to be cut up and roasted to be consumed by others. Unlike his brother Kishen, he shows more grit and gumption. '....only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed-hunted, beaten, and burned alive by his masters-can break out of the coop. That would take no normal being, but a freak, a pervert of nature. It would, in fact take a White Tiger. You are listening to the story of a social entrepreneur, sir' he says addressing the Chinese premier.(176-177) Balram dares because he craves for another kind of success that is a far cry from the red chicken curry his grandma serves up.

As far as revolting against his master is concerned, Balram does that through an opportunistic way. He shows the typical servility that a driver shows to his master and his family. While working for Ashok and his father, referred to as the stork, Balram is astute enough to know how to please his masters and also Ashok's wife Pinky. He is unobtrusive, yet, always there, whenever he is needed. He proves himself to be a loyal servant when Pinky accidentally kills a beggar child, whose death is not even noticed. He stands by his masters as the horror scene plays out. He even agrees to admit to the killing he has not committed to save his master. However, in actuality, Balram was already on his way to thinking like an entrepreneur; perhaps at a subconscious level he was already thinking of himself as Ashok Sharma, his master. The opportunistic trait and the ability to take risks transform Balram Halwai, driver into businessman 0Ashok Sharma, of Bangalore, boss@whitetiger-technologydrivers.com.(321)

The transformation of Balram from loyal, humble servant to 'the enterprising driver' (229) happens in the course of a few days in Delhi. Balram dreams and desires only wealth and class. He says, after cheating his master, instead of guilt, he felt rage.

'The more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me.'(231)

Adiga, makes an interesting point through Balram and that is, in India, it is common to have a mindset that prevents the downtrodden from allowing others with a similar fate to emerge out of the darkness. 'The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs... The coop is guarded from the inside.'(194) Here again one observes an independent, individualistic streak in Balram which propels him to think differently from other drivers and members of the working class. Adiga alludes to some half formed revolutionary spirit in his protagonist when Balram says

'And if there is blood on these streets-I asked the city-do you promise that he'll be the first to go-that man with the fat folds under his neck?' (221)

The above thoughts play out in the form of a dialogue between Balram and the city of Delhi, the epicenter of corruption, symbolized by the middleman with fat folds under his neck.

THE CHANDELIAR MOTIF

Adiga uses the motif of the chandelier to symbolize the progress of his protagonist who stares at them in his room and revels in its light, remembering the times in his master's home back in the village, where there were chandeliers which stood as a symbol of their wealth and pelf in the darkness of poverty surrounding it. The chandeliers keep appearing, signifying the burning ambition of Balram. It hangs majestically high in the ceiling just like the soaring aspirations of the protagonist. Balram aspires and so he conspires against his master. Balram revels in his freedom when he murders his master and feels that he has escaped from the rooster coop. "I've made it! I've broken out of the coop!"(320) Further, he says 'Yet even if all my chandeliers came crashing down to the floor-even if they throw me in jail... I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat....I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant.'(320)

CONCLUSION:

Mayhem in court rooms, accidental deaths of footpath dwellers, the potbellied middle men and the underlying systemic corruption, failing educational and health set ups and joblessness, all these surface in the novel. Below the thin veneer of a so called booming ,growing economy lies the reality of a struggling surviving India in which beats the hearts of millions of aspirational Indians who possess a strong will and aspiration to emerge out of the hell hole into a better world, 'where humans can live like humans and animals can live like animals.' (317) It is thus, that Aravind Adiga creates such an evocatively etched, strikingly

real, character of Balram Halwai, the voice of the teeming, poverty stricken Indian, but nonetheless roaring like the aspirational white tiger to achieve his dreams.

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