

An Odyssey from Autocracy to Outcry: A Study of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

India is a territory of innumerable tongues, numerous religions, castes and the archetype of "Unity in Diversity". But it is controverted in the Indian Journalist Arvind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger* which is set in India derelicted by depravation, corrosion and insurrection exposing an astute picture of alleged Dark India which is beneficial enough to morally taint people. He challenges the fake democracy in Indian subcontinent where the poor have little power. *The White Tiger* is an attempt to question the 'Shining India' amidst poverty and corruption? It is a manifestation of modern India, calling attention to social justice in the wake of economic prosperity. Adiga writes about the plight and predicament of the poor in India when they migrate to the metropolitan city for their livelihood. The discontent instigated in the exploited against the exploiter transformed an autocracy to outcry. Hence this paper will explore the sufferings, struggles, discrimination, servitude and economic disparity faced by the protagonist in the novel.

Keywords: Autocracy, Outcry, Protagonist, Exploiter

Introduction

These days, one hears so much about the astounding rise of India as a major economic power. The authentic picture of Indian society and the impact of globalization on it is a question of concern. Arvind Adiga's debut novel - "*The White Tiger*" - which won the Booker Prize in 2008 represents a darkly witty perception of India's class struggle in a globalized world as recited through a retrospective voice-over from Balram Halwai, the protagonist. Adiga says his novel "attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India — the voice of the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the constraint for *The White Tiger* was to imprison the unsaid voice of people from "the Darkness" – the impoverished areas of rural India, and he "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually." *The White Tiger* is a critical portrait of present day India as a society of servitude and unbridled corruption. M.Q. Khan remarks, "The book, as a whole, presents the crude, dark and naked facts about India" (1). It projects a land of slums and poor down-trodden people struggling against the affluent middle-class elites and politicians in the rich palaces. The protagonist, Balram, while recounting his life

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ISSN 2321 - 7065

of adventure, tribulation and struggle, untangles the duality of the country and his psychosomatic agony and desire.

Commencement of an Autocratic Journey: Exploitation and Disparity

The White Tiger happens in India. The protagonist Balram Halwai is born in Laxmangarh, a rural village in "the Darkness". In Laxmangarh, Balram was brought up in a poor family from the Halwai caste, a caste that designates sweet-makers. Balram's father is a besieged rickshaw driver and his mother died when he was young. Balram was initially referred to simply as "Munna," meaning "boy," since his family had not bothered to name him. He did not have another name until his schoolteacher dubbed him Balram.

"Munna? That's not a real name."

He was right: it just means "boy."...

"Didn't your mother name you?"

"She's very ill, sir. She lies in bed and spews blood. She's got no

Time to name me."

"And your father?"

"He's a rickshaw-puller, sir. He's got no time to name me."

"Don't you have a granny? Aunts? Uncles?"

"They've got no time either."...

The teacher turned aside...

"Well, it's up to me, then, isn't it?"... It'll be *Balram*. You know

Who Balram was, don't you?"

"No, sir."

"He was the sidekick of the god Krishna. Know what my name is?"

"No, sir."

He laughed. "Krishna." (Adiga, *The White Tiger* 13, 14)

Balram's life expedition includes three phases: 1) his childhood in Laxmangarh 2) chauffer-ship in Delhi 3) business-person in Bangalore. In every phase, his life is disheveled by socio-political-ethical problems that are prevalent in India and create turmoil as well as upliftment in his life. He ascends up the success ladder, departing values and via wicked means he accomplishes his target in his journey.

Laxmanargh, the typical Indian village Paradise is subjugated by four rapacious landlords - The Buffalo, The Stork, The Wild Boar and The Raven who plunder the poor and exploit their labour. The people of Darkness spend their entire life in servitude and poverty. The Protagonist is called 'Munna' (means 'a boy') by his parents. He is named Balram Halwai at school. His father Vikram Halwai, the rickshaw puller stands unique among the villagers: "He could have worked with the landlord's mud but he chose not to. He chose to fight it....my father was a man with a plan. I was his plan" (Adiga, *The White Tiger* 27).

The boy demonstrated himself intelligent and talented, and was praised one

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day as a rare “White Tiger” by a visiting school inspector. Regrettably, Balram had to leave his school to work in a tea shop with his brother, Kishan. There, he added his education by snooping on the discussions of shop customers. Balram believes that there are two Indias: the impoverished “Darkness” of the rural, inner continent, and the “Light” of urban coastal India.

“Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of darkness”.(Adiga, *The White Tiger* 14). A phenomenon that he calls the “Rooster Coop” traps the Indian underclass in an everlasting state of servitude. It involves both premeditated methods exploited by the upper class and a mindset imposed by the underclass on itself.

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens 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 whole cage giving off a horrible stench – the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of

ISSN 2321 - 7065

dark blood. 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. (Adiga, *The White Tiger* 173, 174)

An Autocracy turned in to Outcry

Once trained, Balram was employed by the Stork - whom he crossed path with accidentally as a chauffeur for his sons, Mushek Sir and Mr. Ashok. Officially, Balram was the “second driver,” driving the Maruti Suzuki, while another servant, Ram Parsad, drove the more desirable Honda City. As a driver in the Stork’s household, Balram lived a steady and acceptable life. He wore a uniform and slept in a covered room which he shared with Ram Parsad. When Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam, decided to visit Laxmangarh one day, Balram drove them there, and thus got an opportunity to visit his family. They were conceited of his accomplishments, but Kusum pressured him to get married, which angered him since that would relinquish what he thought as his upward mobility.

The Stork’s family, involved in dappled business transactions in the coal industry, must regularly bribe the Great Socialist to ensure their success. As part of these political

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maneuverings, Ashok and Pinky Madam made plans to go to Delhi for three months. When Balram learned that only one driver would be brought with them, he spied on Ram Parsad to discover that the man was secretly a Muslim who had lied about his identity to gain employment. Balram considers Delhi to be a crazy city, rife with traffic jams and pollution, and with illogically numbered houses and circuitous streets that are difficult to navigate.

Troubles started growing in Balram's life in the name of Pinky who gets over drunk and runs the car into a child late at night. Balram is forced to take all the charges on himself for he is an obedient, submissive and loyal servant to his master. He says, he is not the only person to suffer in this way.

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters....

Doesn't the driver's family protest? Far from it. They would actually go about bragging. Their boy Balram had taken the fall, gone to Tihar jail for his employer. He was loyal as a dog. He was the perfect servant.

The judges? Wouldn't they see through this obviously forced confession? But they are in the racket too. They take their bribe; they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And

ISSN 2321 - 7065

life goes on. (Adiga, *The White Tiger* 170)

Meanwhile, Balram is tainted by wicked thoughts of yielding himself to earn money besides salary. He learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell Johnnie Walker Black Label bottles. He wants to live in the lap of luxury and comfort savored by the rich. After much conflict, the spiteful desire takes over him to steal his master's seven hundred thousand rupees and to murder him leaving his family in danger. He knows that his family at Laxmangarh will be beaten to death or burnt alive by the landlords after his robbery. He wants to take the revenge for what is going to happen to his family and so he murders Ashok. It takes him four weeks to calm down his nerves after the ghastly murder. In the final phase of his of his mission, Balram turns into a social entrepreneur donning the name Ashok Sharma. Balram establishes a cab named "The White Tiger Drivers" with the motto – "We Drive Technology Forward", with sixteen drivers and twenty-six vehicles to pick up and drop off the employees. Now he earns fifty times the sum he robbed from his employer. The streets of India, instead the school, teaches him the ways to live. The ways and means adopted might not be ethical and moral, but he does emerge out as a White Tiger in the end.

Conclusion

In Indian society the "colossal underclass" discovers itself sandwiched between inexplicable psychological pressures that

contour their desires and social forces that confine execution of these desires. Balram's political perception grows more intense, and his antipathy towards the upper class becomes more violent. The novel traces his odyssey from a humble peasant to an inflamed individual capable of murder in pursuit of his own success. *The White Tiger* is a good tonic to clear one's vision and spread one's wings.

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