

The Post-Colonial Theme of Marginalization in Arvind Adiga's Man Booker Prize Winning novel *The White Tiger*

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Arvind Adiga is so far the last and the youngest in the series of Booker winners. He grabbed this award in 2008 for his phenomenal work *The White Tiger*. The novel portrays the life and character of one Balram Halwai who, through his rise in life from a simple, non-existent and remarkable person to an entrepreneur, believes and practices the power of money. The book unfolds two different visages of the country. One is identically poor, undeveloped and corrupt; the second is the hidden, rich and more corrupt. Adiga makes it very clear at the outset of the novel, "that India is two countries in one; an India of light and an India of darkness". Balram's journey from darkness of the village life to the light of entrepreneurial success is utterly amoral, brilliantly irreverent but altogether unforgettable. The writer aims to unveil the real picture of the country and discovers that hierarchy and corruption are rampant.

The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalised world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately Balram transcends the sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and unemployment, he represents 'tomorrow'. Globalisation enhances marginalisation. Here in this novel Balram was already marginalised and deprived of the bare necessities of life in the village of Bihar. He emerges to be the most intelligent student in the school. He is named

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The White Tiger' by the school inspector. He is a smart boy; however, poverty forces him to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin sister's dowry. He starts working in a tea shop. He is still feeling marginalised and inconsequential, while working in the teashop he begins to learn about India's economy from the customer's conversations. Balram is ambitious to become a driver to get rid of his being marginalised and impoverished.

As a matter of fact *The White Tiger* is a novel of multi dimensional attitudes. It examines the issues of religion loyalty, corruption, injustice, power, poverty, class struggle and man's quest for freedom that make us uncomfortable and astonished about what going is on in India which is known as 'incredible India. The novelist himself is of the opinion that poor people are caught in the rooster coop made by the rich people and they are forced to live their life like caged animals and India has become two countries in one; India of the poor and India of the rich; "...India is two countries is one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness."⁴ Adiga further writes... "Delhi is the capital of not one but two countries - two Indias. The Light and Darkness both flow in to Delhi."⁵ Amod Kumar Rai opines. "The book [*The White Tiger*] unfolds two different visages of the country. One is identically poor, undeveloped and corrupt, second is the hidden, the rich and more corrupt."⁶ The novelist depicts a shocking insight of two countries and depicts the grim reality and naked picture of Indian poor people who are living a life no better than dogs of rich people.

Arvind Adiga, a contemporary Indian English novelist who poured in his novel *The White Tiger*, the extraordinary heartrending feelings for the down trodden section of the Indian society is delineating the two contradictory opposite sides of India : the India of underdogs and the India of elites, India of light and India of darkness. Adiga in his debut novel realistically paints on the one hand the nation as the dark, the corrupt, the wasteland, the Subaltern and the illiterate; on the other hand nation is seasoned with affluent luxury, extravagant life style and as an emerging and booming India.⁷

The White Tiger is an epistolary novel by Arvind Adiga suffused with satire and dark humour, it is a clear slap on the 'Developing' India rhetoric.

The reader is shocked by the brilliant and ruthless unveiling. Of the inexorable truth about India: power and injustice reign and the deprived always struggle under the fantastic cravings of the rich. The story flows like a meandering river, taking us into an India of light at one time, and

then into a completely contrasting India of Darkness with a sudden and startling turn.

Balram Halwai is the protagonist of the novel. He is a witty, Psychopathic, mordant, sardonic, pragmatic, self-mocking white tiger whose roar breaks through the polyphony of India imagined. Balram hails from Laxmangarh, a small village in Gaya. His father is a rickshaw puller who wants his son to get educated and become a 'man'. He dreams, "my whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine - at least one - should live like a man." The affection between father and son and father's dream for his son Balram reminds us of the love and dream of cook for his son Bijju in Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* where cook also dreams for his son to be a man. This dream does not show only his love for his son but also reveals the poor condition of rickshaw pullers in the society in general. Adiga observes: "They were not allowed to sit on the plastic chairs put out for the customers; they had to crouch near the back, in that hunched-over, squatting posture common to servants in every part of India."⁹ Balram lost his mother at a very young age. He was looked after by his grandmother and other family members.

Balram calls Laxmangarh a typical Indian Village paradise without water and electricity supply and where children are malformed "Laxmangarh is your typical Indian village paradise...Electricity poles - defunct. Water tap-broken, 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."¹ The holy river Ganga is a black river into which no one should dip, unless (they) want (their) "mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids."¹¹ Laxmangarh suffers not only from what it does not have but also from what it has. The village has four landlords, who are no better than Animal. They are savage and brutal in wielding their power on the poor villagers, who have to surrender more than half of their hard earned money to those Animals. This is a typical representation of an Indian Village - the poor are always exploited by the rich. They are condemned to a perpetual state of poverty by those who represent the India of

The Buffalo [one of the four landlords] was greediest of the lot. He had eaten up the rickshaws and the roads. So if you ran a rickshaw, or used the road, you had to pay him his feed-one-third of whatever you earned, no less.

The tragic irony is that the oppressed cannot raise their voices in democratic India, and the guardians of the law are themselves unguarded. If anyone dares to, his family is the first to suffer: it is wiped out into oblivion. And India is democratic, so anyone, regardless of where he is from, either from the Darkness or the Light can cast his vote and choose his representative. But if the dwellers of the Darkness are compelled to vote against their choices, democracy certainly cannot offer any bright prospects to them. This is why Indian democracy has been called 'a fucking joke' by Balram. "It is a fucking joke of our political system - and I'll keep saying it as long as I like... "Things are complicated in India... "We have this fucked- up system called parliamentary democracy."¹³ Balram is not able to complete his studies. His family has taken loan from one of the landlords to marry his sister. Unable to pay the money back, the boys of the family have to toil at the village tea shop, thus depriving Balram of chance to attend the school. "The family had taken a big loan from the Stork [one of the landlords of the village] so they could have a lavish wedding and a lavish dowry for my cousin-sister. Now the Stork had called in his loan. He wanted all the members of the family working for him and he had seen me in school or his collector had. So they had to hand me over too."¹⁴ And once entitled as the white tiger by education inspector due to his talent he becomes the coal breaker at the tea shop. He works there with his brother Kishan for some years, then goes to Dhanbad with him after his father's death where he works as a driver in the house of one his village landlords. He is brought to Delhi by Mr. Ashok, the landlord's son who had studied in America.

There are vivid descriptions of Balram's journey from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad and then to Delhi and a riveting revelation about the 'Shining India' is associated with each and every one of them. India is developing, India is improving, India seeking new heights of success... it absolutely is, but it is only the India of which sucks the blood of India of Darkness to keep it alive. The Indian government has started welfare schemes for the poor- free health service, free education, and many other. Sure, the health service is free, but a patient requires a doctor. The doctors employed by the government seldom care to come to government hospital. And so Balram's father, suffering from severe tuberculosis lost his life with the free service of the government. The novelist aptly remarks:

There was no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy, after

we bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening....He [doctor] did not. Around six o'clock that day, as the government ledger no doubt accurately reported, my father was permanently cured of his tuberculosis. The ward boy made us clean up after Father before we could remove the body.¹⁵

Similarly, the teachers-moulders of the lives of the student, sleep in government schools. The teacher of the primary school in Laxmangarh used to steal the money meant for students uniform and lunch "and everyone knew why: the school teacher had stolen our lunch money....Once, a truck came into the school with uniforms that the government had sent for us; we never saw them, but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighbouring village."¹⁶ If any inspector came, he was bribed.

Tide to this tragic irony of democracy; is another problem of the 'Rooster Coop': Three important questions are there about the rooster coop: first what is it? Second why does it work? And third can a man break out of the coop.¹⁷

a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse..." Adiga further views: ...the answer to the first question is that the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice, the subject of no doubt considerable space in the pamphlet that the prime minister will hand over to you, the Indian family, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop.¹⁷

The answer to the first question is that 99.9 percent of men in the country are caught in perpetual servitude:

The answer to the second question is that the bonds of the Indian family keep a man trapped and tied and make the coop work. As the novelist writes: "a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed-hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters-can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being but a freak, a pervert of nature"¹⁸ The answer to the third question is that only that man would dare to break out of the coop who can see his family destroyed in the most brutal way and who operates the coop, the rich, the powerful, those who reside in the height. The best example of the working of the coop is provided when Balram's employers place the blame of the murder of a child on Balram. The child had been hit by Mr. Ashok's car which his wife was driving. Balram takes the blame without any grudge as he knows the implications and the consequences of any rebellion. The

thought of speaking the truth-before the judge, or anyone, never crosses his mind; he is caught in the rooster coop, where the powerful, in collusion, conspire to keep those in servitude forever so. Balram comments: "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. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse."¹⁹ Adiga frankly focuses on Indian government working culture that almost everyone in modern India, from the policeman to the judge, can be bribed and bought, and they are in the racket too. It doesn't affect them that an innocent person is sacrificed to protect the real culprit. "The judges? Wouldn't they see through this obviously forced confession? But they are in the racket too. They take their bribe, they ignore for discrepancies in the case. And life goes on. For everyone but the driver."²⁰

Another glimpse of corruption in India that is shown by the novelist is dealing in election. India which is known as the biggest democratic country, deals with parties and common voters' leaders to get votes on the ground of money and power. Poor people are not allowed to go to booth to pole their vote. There has been a tradition of booth capturing in democratic India. As Balram's father tells him, "It's the way it always is, 'my father told me that night. I've seen twelve elections. Five general, five states, two local-and someone else voted for me twelve times."²¹

Of course, the coop is a tradition in India; we cannot point our finger at it, just like we cannot ask questions about the political System. India is not America and things are complicated here. "Things are complicated in India, Ashok it is not like in America."²² A reference to the light and the darkness again spring up when Balram contrasts the state of the poor living on the footpath to those driving in cars with tinted windows across them, in Gurgaon, the modernist part of the Indian capital. "We were like two separate cities inside and outside the dark egg. I knew I was in the right city. But my father, If he were alive, would be sitting on that pavement, cooking some rice gruel for dinner, and getting ready to lie down and sleep under a streetlamp, and I couldn't stop thinking of that and recognizing his features in some beggar out there. So I was in some way out of car too, even while was driving it"²³

The high storey buildings, malls and multiplexes due to which Delhi shines, are constructed by those who are from the Darkness, who, Balram observes, are forced to live in tents' covered with blue tarpaulin sheets and partitioned into lanes by line of sewage. As the novelist observes:

.....all these construction workers who were building the malls and giant apartment buildings lived here. They were from a village in the Darkness; they did not like outsiders coming in, except for those who had business after Dark. ...These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with due tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines sewage”²⁴

It is a very unfortunate state of affairs that these workers, despite their mind numbing toil, are not paid competent wages, and are silenced when they protest.

Balram’s employer, Mr. Ashok is slowly corrupted by the mind boggling system and constant pressure of those around him. This psychosomatically affects Balram, who senses that Mr. Ashok is starting to manipulate him. His defiance for Mr. Ashok goes on increasing day by day. He wants to get out of the Rooster Coop; but the thought of harm to his family stalls him just the same, the very fact that Mr. Ashok threatens his family makes his blood boil. The straw breaks the camel’s back when Balram comes to know that Mr. Ashok plans to unemploy him. He decides that he would not allow that to happen, and the first strike would be his. “The sirens of the coop were ringing- its wheels turning- its red lights flashing! A rooster was escaping from the coop! A hand was thrust out- I was picked up by the neck and shoved back into the coop.”²⁵

Balram realises that he has been looking ‘for the key for years, but the door was always open, once and for all he puts his foot down, and decides to break out of the coop. He murders Mr. Ashok and flees to Bangalore with his bag of money. Hardened by the society and harbouring a deep loathing for the unjust system practiced by tyrants, Balram rejoices in his freedom. As he expresses his view: “I’ ve made it! I’ ve broken out of the coop”²⁶ Though his mind suffered from the guilt of the crime he committed, he felt that “ 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.”²⁷

Balram represent⁸ the white tiger, the rebel of modern India. Albeit he breaks free of the coop, in order to survive, he himself bribes policeman in Bangalore so that he is not identified. He becomes a successful entrepreneur, a product of the half baked Indian clay. He knows that being from the darkness, his survival chances were rare. So he did himself in the light, and adopted his own ways. The novelist shows, “he counted the money -ten thousand rupees -heard what I

wanted, and asked for double. I gave him a bit more, and he was happy. I tell you, Mr. Premier, my poster was right there, the one that I had seen earlier, the whole time I was negotiating with him. The WANTED poster, with the dirty little photo of me.”²⁸

Balram muses whether there ever will be an Indian revolution, for freedom. He arrives at the conclusion that it wouldn’t happen as people of our country have become dependent. They keep waiting for some outside force to fight for their freedom when they themselves hold the key. “People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else - from the jungles, from the mountains, from china, from Pakistan. That will never happen.... instead of which, they’re all sitting in front of colour TVs and watching cricket and shampoo advertisements.”²⁹

Balram is an ordinary half-baked Indian, and throughout the novel we keep wondering - whether he is the protagonist or the antagonist, a thug or a revolutionary, a psychopath or an idealist ? That is for the reader to decide, but the unequivocal fact remains that India-shining or rising- is always sinking, and Balram is a man who defies the accepted tradition. Frustrated by it, he is determined to avenge himself on those who have caught him in the coop, and he plays for the highest stakes in a deadly game. He is a terrific and mordant white tiger that is born once in a generation. Throughout the novel, the protagonist tries his best to justify his act of murder as revenge against his suppression not as a crime. But murder is a criminal act and it could not be a way of protest.

From the beginning of his story Balram feels that in order to rise above his caste and mire of marginalisation, he should become an entrepreneur. Although his taxi service is not an international business, Balram plans to keep up with the pace of globalisation and change his trade if necessary. “I am always a man who sees tomorrow when others see today”, says he. His recognition of the increasing competition resulting from globalisation contributes to corrupt practices but it also helps him overcome his poverty and untold misery of marginalisation.

Works Cited:

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