



Subaltern's Sufferings in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga is an Indo-Australian writer and journalist. His debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won the 2008 Man Booker Prize. The novel studies the contrast between India's rise as a modern global economy and the lead character, Balram, who comes from crushing rural poverty.

Keywords: economy, poverty, injustice, capital

The White Tiger protagonist exposes the rot in the three pillars of modern India – democracy, enterprise and justice – reducing them to the tired clichés of a faltering nation.... that the West is holding *The White Tiger* as a mirror to us. It is telling us that India is not shining and, despite its claims of a booming economy, it is still “the near-heart of darkness”, which it has been since time immemorial” (9) says Saxena.

The story unfolds the way Balram breaks out to his new found freedom from a caged life of misery through crime and cunning. This is a reflection of contemporary India, calling attention to social justice in the wake of economic prosperity. It is a novel about the emerging new India which is pivoted on the great divide between the haves and have-nots with moral implications.

Deirdre Donahue says “But *Tiger* isn't about race or caste in India. It's about the vast economic inequality between the poor and the wealthy elite. The narrator is an Indian entrepreneur detailing his rise to power. His India is a merciless, corrupt Darwinian jungle where only the ruthless survive”(28).

Adiga's first hand meeting the poor of India inspired him to create his protagonist: “Many of the Indians I met while I traveled through India blended into Balram; but the character is ultimately of my own invention. I wanted to depict

someone from India's underclass—which is perhaps 400 million strong—and which has largely missed out on the economic boom, and which remains invisible in most films and books coming out of India... (32) says DiMartino.

The novel, *The White Tiger* is centred on the crime Balram commits and how he became an entrepreneur coming into the 'Light' of prosperity. Born in a tiny hell-hole called Laxmangarh in northern India, his impoverished parents merely called him 'munna' — 'boy' and they raised him in the world of darkness of their extreme poverty. While at school, Balram was spotted by the inspector of schools who offered to get a scholarship for his education (35).

Balram considers himself "half-baked" as he was deprived of schooling like most children of his age group in India. His parents preferred him to work in a teashop, however one of the feudal lords took him to Delhi, where he began to experience the world of light. He learned driving and was employed as a chauffeur by Mr. Ashok at Dhanbad.

Coming to Delhi Balram experiences the two kinds of India with those who are eaten, and those who eat, prey and predators. Balram decides to be an eater, someone with a big belly, and the novel tracks the way in which this ambition plays out. Speaking on the servant-master relationship, Sawhney says:

The servant-master system implies two things: One is that the servants are far poorer than the rich—a servant has no possibility of ever catching up to the master. And secondly, he has access to the master—the master's money, the master's physical person. Yet crime rates in India are very low.... You need two things [for crime to occur]—a divide and a conscious ideology of resentment. We don't have resentment in India. The poor just assume that the rich are a fact of life.... But I think we're seeing what I believe is a class-based resentment for the first time. (27).

In *The White Tiger*, the key metaphor in the novel is of the Rooster Coop. Balram is caged like the chickens in the rooster coop. He, being a white tiger, has to break out of the cage to freedom. Go to Old Delhi ...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...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. Balram decides to become a big-bellied man, by resorting to corrupt ways he has learnt through bribery, crime, disregarding all civilized ways of life. His violent bid for freedom is shocking. Is he made just another thug in India's urban jungle or a revolutionary and idealist ? (Turpin). Adiga "strikes a fine balance between the sociology of the wretched place he has chosen as home and the twisted humanism of the outcast" (40). Balram breaks away slowly from his family which is contrary to the Indian tradition where loyalty to one's family upholds moral principles. Through his criminal drive Balram becomes a businessman and runs a car service for the call centres in Bangalore. He is presented as a modern Indian hero, in the midst of the economic prosperity of India in the recent past. His climbing the ladder of success is by murdering Mr. Ashok, his employer, and stealing his bag full of money – Rs.700,000/-, based on a philosophy of revenge, ambition and corruption.

In *The White Tiger*, the money is sufficient for him to begin a new life with a house of his own, a motorbike and a small shop. He hatched the murder plan in quick succession: "The dream of the rich, and the dreams of the poor – they never overlap, do they? See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like the poor" (225).

Injustice and inequality has always been around us and we get used to it. How long can it go on? Social discontent and violence has been on the rise. What Adiga highlights is the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor and the economic system that lets a small minority to prosper at the expense of the majority. Raaj says "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... the great divide." (9). Adiga probes further into the mind of Balram like an expert psychologist and finds him in perfect mental state, determined to execute his plans with precision. He was not fully satisfied with

the crime. He feared his recovery and the consequences would be fatal – police case and the terrible destruction of his family. So turning the body around and stamping his knees on its chest, he pierced the neck “and his lifeblood spurted into my eyes. I was blind. I was a free man” (286). He is free at last out of the Rooster Coop. But the run for his new-found life begins for Balram. He is on the run to make his dream come true. A peep into the level of poverty into which millions of his fellow Indians are plunged is imperative for a proper assessment of the criminal and the gravity of his crime.

When he plans meticulously how to snatch Ashok’s huge money bag, he gets out of his Rooster Coop and takes a plunge into the entrepreneur’s world. He never gives up the fight for survival like the freak white tiger. While visiting the National zoo in Delhi he tells Dharam: “Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence” (276). When he chanced to see the white tiger in the enclosure, he began his musings: “...Not any kind of tiger. The creature that gets born only once every generation in the jungle. I watched him walk behind the bamboo bars... He was hypnotizing himself by walking like this – that was the only way he could tolerate this cage....The tiger’s eyes met my eyes, like my master’s eyes have met mine in the mirror of the car. All at once, the tiger vanished... My knees began to shake; I felt light” (276-7).

The Rooster Coop continues to exist like a never ending oppressive system. “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).

Adiga makes the protagonist spell out the way enterprising drivers make a little extra money by: i) siphoning petrol and selling, ii) repairing the car under a corrupt mechanic who gives inflated bills, iii) studying his master’s habits and capitalize on his carelessness, iv) risking to make his master’s car into a freelance taxi. Balram thought of making a confession of all these misdeed, but instead of guilt he felt “Rage. The more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me. To go back to the analogy I used when describing Indian politics to you earlier, I was growing a belly at last” (230). It was the mean and ironic behaviour on the part

of Ashok that drives Balram crazy for vengeance. There is perfect communication gap between the two. This is symbolic of the rich-poor divide that is fermenting to take revenge. Balram's plans are confirmed while visiting the National Zoo in Delhi. He sums up his success story as an entrepreneur in Bangalore. He moves from success to success- from being a social entrepreneur to a business entrepreneur. What does he mean by 'social' to 'business'? He has perhaps become another incarnation of Mr Ashok by christening himself Ashok.

All that he can remember is his past juxtaposed with his present status. From a sweet-maker to a business tycoon. The circle is complete in his case like that of his boss Mr Ashok, who was from a cook's family. He claims to be different from Mr Ashok.

Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. I don't treat them like servants – I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling them my 'family' either. They're my employees, I'm their boss, that's all. I make them sign a contract and I sign it too, and both of us must honour that contract. That's all. If they notice the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I keep things clean, they'll go up in life. If they don't, they'll be drivers all their lives. I leave the choice up to them. When the work is done I kick them out of the office: no chitchat, no cups of coffee. A White Tiger keeps no friends. It's too dangerous (302).

Balram sounds very pragmatic. His philosophy of individualism comes close to Mr Ashok's Machiavellianism. Balram's individualism stresses **independence** and self-reliance disregarding any morality, while Ashok's Machiavellianism describes his tendency to deceive and manipulate others for personal gain. He prompts his drivers to imitate him if they wished to succeed in life, becoming White Tigers. He dreams of establishing a school for poor children in Bangalore where he could train them in facts of life. Rapid urbanization due to influx of the poor to cities, calls on planners to utilize it for greater economic growth through sustainability. Meanwhile, the two novels remain powerful subaltern portrayal of rapidly growing planet of the slums with ever increasing poor-rich divide.

Conclusion

Our Government has the political will to fight corruption at all levels and take appropriate measures to fight poverty of its teeming millions with increased investment in basic education, medical care and farming. However, *The White Tiger* should make every right thinking citizen to read the signs of the times and be socially conscious of the rights and duties of each one, irrespective of caste, creed or economic status.

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