



Depiction of Social Discrimination in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract— Arvind Adiga has emerged as a strong writer who has emphatically given voice to the social evils of our contemporary postmodern and post-colonial world— both rural and urban . His debut novel *The White Tiger* is a prominent signature in the realm of Indian writing in English. In the novel he has meticulously depicted the social evils like corruption and poverty in India which are really dangerous and causing real nuisance in society. Aravind Adiga through his novel tries to throw light on the ugly side of social problems to show how such problems have created incorrigible circumstances to the under privileged Indians even in the twenty-first century.



Keywords— Caste, discrimination, society, corruption, poverty, rural, Zamindari, identity.

Arvind Adiga is one of the leading novelists of the contemporary India. He started his career as a financial journalist. He served the Financial Times as an intern and later offered his services to the Time news magazine as the South Asian correspondent. It was during this period that he wrote his seminal work *The White Tiger*. The book was published in the year 2008 and has also been adapted into an eponymous movie which is available on Netflix. The novel establishes the mastery of its author as it won the Man Booker Prize the same year. With this he has become the fourth Indian novelist to win such prestigious accolade, the others being Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai. Although V. S. Naipaul too was a Booker laureate but he was born in Trinidad.

Contemporary Indian society consists of two contradictory worlds- one, the metropolitan and urban centres which represent the country's rapid economic, political, media, academic, commercial, and scientific advancements whereas at the other end of the horizon we have the rural inhabitations which have not yet changed much and are still bound in the chains of widespread ignorance, illiteracy, unemployment, poverty, and low living conditions. However, it cannot be denied that those, in either of these spheres, who have an upper hand at the social, political and economical areas remain at the centre

of all whereas those who lack them remain at the periphery only. The situation is worse in the rural spheres because of the entrenched discriminatory social norms, poverty and ignorance.

Aravind Adiga on the microcosm of the macrocosmic Indian society represents this divide in his novel *The White Tiger*. He ironically shows that how the underprivileged people are still being oppressed and exploited by the privileged section of the society despite India's being counted as emerging global superpower. He discusses poverty, lack of access to healthcare facilities and education in the rural section of India, widespread corruption among government officials, and the sense of moral superiority in India's elite community. Adiga shows in his work that how even today the dominant class continues to dominate the underprivileged for their political and economic gain. Sanjay Kumar and Surjit Singh write, "The novelist (Adiga) wants to convey the message that it is the poison of casteism, communalism, regionalism, discrimination on social, economic basis etc. which are the obstacles in the way of progress" (Kumar, Sanjay & Surjit Singh, 231).

The White Tiger is a kind of epistolary novel which has picaresque elements in it. In the novel the chief protagonist Balram Halwai, alias Munna, recounts his adventurous

story in a series of letters to Mr. Wen Jiabao, the Prime Minister of China. Through his distinctive narrative technique Adiga lays bare various social issues such as oppression, hunger, illiteracy, poverty, sufferings, unemployment, dowry system, prostitution and feudalism. He also exhibits the socio-political system of India which leads a number of unwarranted religious practices, superstitions and the corruption of the political leaders and bureaucratic officials. Through the eyes of Balram we get a deeper sight of the rural India which is bifurcated into wealthy and poor, bourgeois and proletariat, elite and working and pure and impure. In the novel, at different places, we get reference to 'India of Light' and 'India of Darkness'; 'men with big stomachs' and 'men with small stomachs'; 'the rich and the poor'; 'the master and the slave' etc. It clearly shows how the same land is inhabited by two diverse groups of people. It is the land of light as well as darkness, where darkness comes in the share of the poor who are supposed to have 'small stomachs' whereas those who live in big buildings in either rural or urban areas have 'big stomachs' the rich and powerful people.

Balram is a young lad who is born and brought up in a village named Laxmanpur. Balram's family lives in the darkness in the village of Laxmanpur. It is a village, which like other villages, is an arena of power play where the downtrodden are subjected to exploitation, torture and torment by those who are at the rungs of power, the village landlords. Balram is the son of a rickshaw puller named Vikram Halwai. He is a rickshaw puller and an honest man. He himself utters "He is a man of honour and courage" (Adiga, 23). But his honesty and hard work fails to win him respect in society. He says, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey." Balram describes the life of rickshaw pullers. They became very weak and unhealthy by pulling and pedaling the rickshaw. Adiga writes, "They (the rickshaw puller) 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" (24). He further says, "... thin, stick like men, leaning forward from the seat of bicycle, as they pedal along a carriage bearing a pyramid of middle-class flesh -- some fat man with his fat wife and all their shopping bags and groceries" (27). However, he did not want his son to be treated in the same vein but as a man.

Balram started receiving his primary education from his village. The teacher recognizes his potential and calls him Balram. Even the school inspector addresses him as 'White Tiger' as an appreciation of his smartness and brilliance. Through Balram's narration of his school days we come to know about the education system in the rural areas where the schools are in a very miserable condition which lack basic infrastructure and less committed teachers.

Balram's teacher hardly pays attention to his regular classes. He always tries to avoid the works which he has been allotted to do. Balram talks about the corruption in the mid-day meal too. expresses his grievances he says, "We never ever saw rotis, or yellow dall, or pickles, and everyone knew why; the school teacher had stolen our lunch money" (Adiga, 33). Even the school teacher does so helplessly because he has not been paid his salary for the last six months. The school teacher sells the school uniforms too in the black-markets which are supposed to be distributed among the students. Balram utters, "We never saw them, but a week later, they turned up for sale in the neighbouring village" (32). Such murky deeds at a place like school casts an indelible effect on the young mind of Balram.

Adiga also points out the malpractices existing in the medical field. He lays bare the actual conditions of the government hospitals. The patients who are admitted in these hospitals are not treated well and taken care of. On the contrary they are left and abandoned before the complete treatment. Balram refers to a hospital named Lohia Universal Free Hospital and says that whoever is admitted in this hospital would hardly be completely cured. Not only this but talking about the medical officials he says that the post of the Medical Superintendent usually is on sale and whoever is ready to pay, gets it. The junior doctors do not visit the hospitals but their attendance is filled for the exchange of their one third salaries. In one of these hospitals, Balram's father also died of tuberculosis due to the lack of proper timely treatment in the hospital.

Aravind Adiga, through his mouthpiece, also discusses one of the most burning contemporary social issues in India; i.e., dowry. In India, dowry makes a marriage way too expensive which is often beyond the affordability of ordinary middle class families. The bride's family has to arrange a great deal of money for the arrangements of the wedding function and buy gifts that could satisfy the desires of the groom's family. It leads the brides family in a kind of predicament from which is not easy to come out. It pushes them in the quagmire of debt from which escape is not possible. In the novel Balram's family also undergoes the similar problem when the marriage of his cousin sister, Reena, is fixed. He states, "We had to give the boy a new bicycle, and cash, and a silver bracelet, and arrange for a big wedding" (36).

In order to cover the cost of the wedding of Balram's cousin, his family is bound to take out an advance, a loan, on their rent from one of the village landlords, the Stork which they gave themselves over as a settlement to the landlord. It was settled that the family members will have to work day in day out so that they can pay back the

amount of the loan to the landlord. On account of the extremely poor condition of his family Balram's Halwai could not receive enough education to enable them to find good jobs to earn livelihood. They have to seek work at hotels or in coal mines. Balram too has to drop out of college and do a job at a tea stall.

Although Zamindari and Talookdari systems have been abolished long ago on paper by the constitutional amendments, however they are still prevalent in the rural areas of India in a somewhat different disguise. The novelist sincerely delineates how the village landlords torture and exploit the poor and innocent villagers with the help of other equally competent authorities such as politicians, government officials, police forces and priests. The poor villagers easily fall prey to the maneuvers and manipulations of these shrewd people even in this age of globalization. In the village of Laxmangarh, there are four kinds of oppressive landlords who collectively loot the poor people of that area. They aggravate the miseries of the poor villagers and turn the 'Indian Village Paradise' into hell. In the novel they are called 'Animals' and named after the same because of their inhuman brutality. They are the Wild Boar, the Stork, the Buffalo, and the Raven. The Stork is a fatso man who owns a river. The river flows outside the village on which he levies various charges on the fishermen who fish in the river and even the boatmen who cross the river to come to his village. The second one, the Wild Boar owns all the agricultural land around the village. Those who want to work there have to bow down before him and touch the sand under his sleepers for expressing their respect for him. He hardly pays any wages to them. The third one Raven is the owner of all the infertile land around the village and he charges all the shepherds who go there with their flocks to graze them. The last one, the Buffalo who is the greediest of them all, takes one-third of every day's earnings of all the rickshaw pullers of that area. Thriving on the money that they have looted from the poor, simpleton and helpless villagers they reside outside of Laxmangarh in high-walled mansions.

Balram becomes the voice of the largely oppressed, abused and exploited poor brethren in his village and of almost all the villages in India at large. His words portray the kind of tyranny which the lower class people receive by the people at higher strata. He narrates an incident where a landlord's son was kidnapped by the naxalite. The landlord is unable to find the kidnappers so he takes out frustration upon the caretaker's son who is tortured and later shot dead. His entire family is killed and his house set on fire. Krishna Singh points out, "Adiga has successfully highlighted the subaltern issue in the novel and brought home the idea that in the story of India's progress role of the underclass is important. He as a communist

manifesto, pleads strongly for the classless society" (Singh, 111)

The gap between the haves and have nots has increased manifold in the twenty-first century, which is supposed to be an era of property and development. Archana Bhattacharjee in her Introduction to Reflection of Social Ethos In the selected Novels of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga writes, "Globalization has accelerated the economic growth of the country but it has also widened the rich-poor gap. It portrays a satirical picture of class struggle in India. It is a brilliant and unflinching vision of modern India" (Bhattacharjee, 53).

Portraying the real picture of a typical Indian village Balram writes, "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" (19-20). Thus there are electricity poles but have no supply of electricity. Similarly the water taps are broken and without water and the children are starving without the basic necessity and suffer due to malnutrition. Priyanka Pasari writes, "The White Tiger is a novel born in that infinitesimal moment of darkness. And as a debut, it marks the arrival of a storyteller who strikes a fine balance between the sociology of the wretched place he has chosen as home and the twisted humanism of the outcast" (Pasari, 2).

Balram was born in a poverty stricken lower class. He has had suffered miseries both as a child as well as a grown up man. His frustration with the discriminatory standards can be felt when he says, "Am I not a human being too?" (148). He knows that there is a little or no chance for the poor to supersede the rich. But he wants to improve his status. He moves from his native place to the city of Dhanbad with his brother Kisan. He decides to become a taxi driver and to fulfil his ambition he starts raising money to take driving lessons from a taxi driver.

Later he goes to Delhi as the chauffeur of one of the landlord's son Ashok. With his shift we are able to see the vast gap between rich and poor and between two castes; the internal affairs of political parties; bribery; black-mailing and corruption etc. Ashok visited Delhi to sort out his tax problem related to coal mines. Not only this he bribed ministers to get the contracts of coal mines.

Balram realises that the discrimination between the rich and the poor is not only in the villages but also in the metropolitan cities like Delhi. Finally, one day Balram took advantage of Ashok's faith and trust in him. He killed him with an empty whisky bottle, stole his bag with 700,000 rs. in it. Balram escaped to Bangalore along with his cousin Dharam. There he changed his name Ashok Sharma, started a taxi company and became a wealthy entrepreneur in

India's most technologically advanced metropolitan city. He is not only an entrepreneur but also a roguish criminal, capable of self-justification. Murder of Ashok by Balram is a result of deep-rooted frustration of underclass experiencing the separation between the upper class and lower class. Wankhede writes, "The voice of Balram seems to be a new India . . . The protagonist even justifies his employer's murder as an act of class rivalry making 'The White Tiger' a discriminating piece of social commentary, accustomed to the inequalities that continue despite India's new prosperity" (135).

Thus, the story begins in Bihar and concludes in Bangalore and in this journey Balram, to quote Vandana Pathak, "traces his quest for identity, from a 'country Mouse' to a 'White Tiger'" (Pathak, 61). Adiga in the novel has unmasked the real face of society which is replete with several social, political, religious and cultural evils such as poverty, illiteracy, sufferings, corruption in government offices, unemployment, dowry system, prostitution, rotten political system, feudalism, wrong doings of the religious heads in the name of gods and goddesses etc. of the society. It, indeed, to quote Vinita Singh Chawdhry, "offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of modern India.(it) encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of this community which has lived at the bottom of India's social pyramid for millennium" (Chawdhry, 234).

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