



ARAVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER: AN ANATOMY OF DEEPENING MORAL CRISIS IN INDIA TODAY

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India reflected through the slogan 'Bharat Mahan' meaning, by "implication, 'India shining' is akin to recalling Noam Chomsky's idea that 'optimism is a strategy for creating a better future'. But the trajectory used Adiga to reflect India through his debut novel The White Tiger is a contrast that weans the optimistic strategy of making India a modern global economic power. Therefore, when the Man Booker Prize for the year 2008 was given to him, a few readers refuted it immediately as the conditions and situations of the novel hurt their pride by unfolding the veneer of artificiality and hypocrisy of the strategy working behind popularizing the notion of 'India shining' and felt it had been given - unnecessary hype in the international arena because it exposes the dark side of the nation. Then there is another set of readers (to which I too belong) who found it extremely fascinating and original in form and content because it sheds light more on contemporary thinking and studies the symptoms of germs that govern human behaviour than exposing the ugliness of the society. Adiga, being a susceptible Indian writer, sets the novel against the backdrop of India shining campaign vis-a-vis class division and struggle in the world of darkness in order to embody the truths of society and thus portraying vibrant pictures of Indian life with a view to reflect the mood and the spirit of the age more pervasively and effectively. It gives Adiga his contemporaneity, and makes his novel extremely relevant today, as the reflection of democracy, injustice and entrepreneurship constitute the subject matter of the novel. Therefore, without being reductive, my attempt in this paper is to examine the text symptomatically.

The novel evinces how modern civilization in its wake bafflement has brought about massive inequalities in the opportunities that hardly serve the purpose of the underdogs for the world is both spectacularly rich and distressingly impoverished. Globalization, materialism and technological advancement in our country have come as a shattering climax of the process of disintegration in society, which started in the late 80s and 90s of the last century and has continued to dominate the social milieu in the present. The traumatic economic differences and the discomforting nature of governance have put the nation's credibility on trial, as the society is exposed to a situation in which the gulf between haves and have-nots appears to be hostile and unbridgeable. People whom we call underclass were ignored in the colonial period, and have been oppressed in the decades since Independence. The national movement, under Gandhi's direction, worked hard to make them part of the mainstream. But the corruption of our political class and of the, State more generally has compounded the growing inequality between the rich and the poor. Because of that, they are now moving from peripheral corruption to extreme decadence. It is a new process of exclusion in which "Men with big bellies". determine the fate of "Men with small bellies".

This reality deters the novelist from taking any prejudicial view, and enables him to portray the maladies of society with scientific detachment and exactitude. In an interview, Adiga himself said about this complex dynamics: Well, this is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about, rather than just hearing about the 5% of people in my country who are doing well..... at 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. (Jeffries).

India's rise as a modern global economy, the tensions between India and China as Asian superpowers and a number of burning social issues like corruption endemic to Indian society and politics have been voiced in the novel. In fact, the novelist puts forth these complexities of the country in Balram's voice, the protagonist, to 'relocate India in a political and economic context' (Outlook) and highlights the injustice and power in the form of class division and struggle in the world of darkness, which adversely affects all walks of life. The story of the novel centers round Balram's emergence from the world of "Darkness" TO the world of "Light". He is a suppressed person representing the downtrodden who have been



relegated to the margins of the society since time immemorial. However, the condition of such people in majority remained more or less the same even after independence and non-functioning of the governing agencies seemed working in favour of the landlords and capitalists. Rampant corruption in politics and bureaucracy have crimped the system in such a way that for a person like Balram has no alternative in the given set-up that can help improve his social status. Socially, educationally and economically deprived Balram jumps into the fray to fulfil his dream of making money in the Macbethian fashion where fair is foul and foul is fair. Therefore, against this dissent, in the process he kills his master and goes to Bangalore to become an entrepreneur to realise the cherished dream of his life. Adiga says: The novel is written in "voice"—in Balram's voice—and not in mine. Some of the things that he's confused by or angry about are changes in India that I approve of... Some of the other things he's unhappy about—like corruption—are easier for me to identify with. When talking too many whom I met in India, I found a sense of rage, often suppressed for years and years, that would burst out when they finally met someone they could talk to... Balram's anger is not an anger that the reader should participate in entirety—it can seem at times like the rage you might feel if you were in Balram's place—but at other times you should feel troubled by it, certainly (DiMartino).

Actually, the novel begins at Laxmangarh, a village near Gaya, where the landlords used to exploit the poor and the downtrodden perennially in their greed for power and money. Balram Halwai, who is the son of an impoverished rickshaw puller, lives in the same village where a landlord Mr Ashok owns most of the land round the village. The members of the family of Ashok are in affluent business as coal merchants in Dhanbad, where they live in a large mansion with hoards of servants. When Ashok returns from America with his Indian Christian wife, Pinky Madam, the family decides to send him to Delhi to bribe everyone who matters to keep the family business going uninterrupted. Balram tactfully manages to secure his place in the family as a car driver and goes to drive his master and mistress in their Honda City. It does not only give Balram an opportunity to view the difference between the world of light and the world of darkness but also paves his way to understand the obvious ways of prospects in life. He finds it interesting and surprising because all that glitters in this world of light is not gold. It is a world where everything is sold and purchased. Ministers, politicians, intermediaries, police, magistrates, everyone has a negotiable price tag. The malls, call centre culture, wads of currency note, booze in five-star hotels, prostitutes of all nationalities in Delhi seems very alluring to him. He finds himself amidst new system of values in which social participation produced by the multinational culture view an article of beauty not by its quality but by its attractive packing. Adiga maps the difference with diversity with the help of his journalistic experiences and purposefully hints at the disharmony notwithstanding to expose the real face of the nation but to seek attention on serious issues pertaining to real life situation. Balram, being the son of a rickshawallah, comprehends the difference in terms of ways of living life and finds the promiscuous life of light comforting and glamorous in comparison to that of the people living in Laxmangarh who are no better than human spiders. living in isolation, Balram draws the attention of the President: Go to a tea shop anywhere along the Ganga, sir, and look at the men working in that. Tea shop - men, I say, but better to call them human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still 'boys'. But that is your fate if you do your job well - with honesty, dedication, and sincerity, the way Gandhi would have done it, no doubt (51).

The novelist presents this heart-rending condition of the people in order to show the widening cleavage between the rich and the poor that goes on widening everyday and economic system that lets a small minority to prosper at the expense of the majority. Therefore, when munna, as Balram is named by his school teacher, is given a "parting gift" by the inspector of schools in the form of book "lessons for young boys from the life of mahatma Gandhi" for giving correct answer about 'the white tiger', who "comes along only once in a generation" (35), he is determined to allow the white tiger move freely out the cage of those lessons. He knows that in this blind world of jungle Gandhian principle is not a key to success. It is ruthlessly massacred by none other than the users of Gandhian uniform in front of his image. He has been reduced to a mere frame of show and tool of ceremonial gimmick. He is used, abused and killed every day. That is the reason why he decided to do his "job with near total dishonesty, lack of dedication and insincerity" (51). Indian today has forgotten the Gandhian principles and his ways of life. He is missing everywhere and the country without him seems to be a country without goal. The loss in moral values has divided India in the 'India of Light' and 'India of Darkness'.



This is what the antihero Balram conveys to the visiting Chinese Premier through his epistles about his progress in particular and the progress of the country in general. He narrates his journey of life, which is full of crime and corruption, through a series of seven, long, imaginary letters to the president of China, Wen Jiabao and says: "Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one; an India of Light and India of Darkness" (14). The people living in 'India of Darkness' are servants and people living in 'India of Light' are masters. This servant master equation presents a puzzle. All endeavours to find a clue to this puzzle have turned futile. The difference still persists. This is the case even in the era of Globalization and liberalization because the ground realities still continue to be the same as of old and because the benefits not percolating to the grassroots and being confined to certain classes alone and because of capitalists in its new avatars with subtle masks still continuing exploitation of the underclass. Inequality is one of the major reasons behind the exploitation. Indian society is heavily agrarian and even after sixty years of independence it does not experience substantial change in social structure. Occupation, caste and family are the basic concepts on which the edifice of the social structure resides. Moreover, that does not yield assistance in removing inequality from society in terms of wealth and property. Andre Beteille observes: An important tradition in social theory views the structure of inequality in terms of wealth and property. There are large disparities of wealth and property in Indian society, these are of great importance in the agrarian system where landownership and landlessness are the two poles between which inequalities are structured (Beteille).

Nevertheless, the people of these two countries in one heavily rely on each other for they are inseparable part of the process of growing economy of the nation as a whole; but they, unfortunately, live lives on many layers and each of which is inextricably linked up with the other. Therefore, the letters of Balram are an amalgam of helplessness, anger, protest, despair and frustration. In fact, it covers all spheres of life including nationalism, democracy and entrepreneurship and show many things, which the modern India encounters in its day-to-day affairs, like how changing values with their allied likings and dislikes lead to the degeneration in values of life.

Adiga uses a metaphor of Rooster Coop to show the plight of the underclass in their servitude waiting for their turn to be chopped off like roosters. Balram immortalises the metaphor by presenting a realistic picture of the society before the Premier:

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... They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country (173-4).

The feelings of Balram about the common people are not far from reality. For instance, so many things may be placed as examples in which a man can be seen fighting an incessant battle of survival and to present that scenario we do not need any statistically correct data. It is a commonplace sites that, inspite of an act of child labours; children are made engaged in various uncalled activities. On the other hand, since the system is helpless to engage the mind of youths of our generation as human resources, the idle mind finds its outlet in devil's work. The temple of democracy itself has become a hub of corruption where wads of currency note float on the floor of Parliament before the TV camera. Judiciary, bureaucracy and other law enforcing agencies are found denying justice to the common person by delaying the same for various reasons. In a situation as this, can one feel protected and safe? In addition, if we go by statistics to gauge the socio-economic scenario of the country, the picture becomes more dismal and traumatic. I concur with the following facts furnished by Neelam Raaj in support of Adiga's concerns: (i) 4 in every 10 Indian children are malnourished according to a UN report, (ii) India ranks a lowly 66 out of 88 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2008. (iii) One third of the world's poor live in India according to the World Bank. (iv) India ranks 128 out of 177 countries in the UN's Human Development Index. ...Aravind Adiga's story of a rickshawallah's move from the "darkness of rural India to the "light" of urban Gurgaon reminds us of the harsh facts behind the fiction. (Any Tears for Aam Aadmi.)



This story of the son of a rickshawallah Balram Halwai from Munna to Ashok Sharma eventually turns out to be "The Autobiography of a Half Baked Indian" (10) because it is full of incidents and accidents. It tells us an unprecedented success of a slumdog Munna who becomes an entrepreneur and lives in the world's centre of technology and outsourcing Electronics City Phase 1 (just off Hosur Main Road), Bangalore, India(3). The journey of Munna from ...a tea shop in Dhanbad...(51) to Bangalore as Ashok Sharma finds its conformity in the idea I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'(319), He is a thinking man who acts and reacts according to changing conditions. So this half-backed and half-fed Balram takes up the struggle rising out of a village to Delhi and then to Bangalore and purposefully reveals how the social voices that negotiate the harsh realities of life try to find its outlet in him. Living in the trap of coop as a member of servant's fraternity, he poignantly shows the compulsion of becoming an honest servant to his master. Since the Indian society is family centred, the people are trapped and tied to the coop due to their attachment with the family.... Only 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 perverted of nature (176). It is a love-hate relationship between servant and master entwined with helplessness and dependency. His informal letters to the Chinese Premier serve as a testimony. The irony working behind the subsistence is objectively analysed in one of his autobiographical letters:

Every evening on the train out of Surat, where they run the world's biggest diamond-cutting and polishing business, the servants of diamond merchants are carrying suitcases full of cut diamonds that they have to give to someone in Mumbai. Why doesn't that servant take the suitcase full of diamonds? He is no Gandhi, he's human, he's you and me. But he's in the Rooster Coop. The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy (319).

The tragic repercussions owing to the stifling yoke of underclass subjugation by the capitalists and the consequential discord are seen best when Ashok's father falsely implicated Balram in the murder cum accident case. Balram is forced to accept the crime done by Pinky Madam in black and white. The confession reads as:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN.

I, Balram Halwai, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement of my own free will and intention: That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects, on the night of January 23rd this year. That I then panicked and refused to fulfil my obligations to the injured party or parties by taking them to the nearest hospital emergency ward. That there were no other occupants of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.

Signature or thumb print:

(Balram Halwai)

Statement made in the presence of the following witness: Kusum Halwai, of Laxmangarh village. Gaya District
Chamandas Varma, Advocate, Delhi High Court (168)

It reminds us of the penury and helplessness of servants and the conditions in which they are used as a means of respite from a big problem. But the incident of accident proves to be a turning point in the life of Balram. He, being familiar with the tricks of his master uses the same upon-him to settle all age-old scores in order to give birth to a new master. Camus analyzing the psycho, socio-cultural complexity of the human personality rightly argues that 'the rebel is a man who is on the point of accepting or rejecting the sacrosanct and determined on creating a human situation where all the answers are human or, rather formulated in terms of reason' (The Rebel). This is how he views himself as a social entrepreneur who successfully breaks out of this coop like an unusual optimistic freak having no sense of guilt. He says:

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. I think I am ready to have children, Mr. Premier.

Ha!

yours for ever,
AshokSharma
The White Tiger
Of Bangalore
boss @whitetiger-technology drivers.com (320-321).

In demonstrating the diabolical parallels between the culture of entrepreneurship and that of subjugation, Adiga articulates an essential disharmony between desire and fulfilment. In the social world, this imbalance has forged new social dynamics that foreground the shifting preoccupations and responses to a new milieu which marks the beginning of ghetto mentality. Multinational culture, apart from being an economical and civilizations' encounter, is a confluence of breach and trust where things are negotiated in terms of profit and loss. For a slumdog Munna no risk no gain is the mantra of becoming a millionaire. Living in Delhi with Ashok, he had learnt the art of putting a cloak on the crime and getting advantage out of it. If the system is accessible and negotiable to Ashok, so it is to Balram. Therefore, he does not bother to risk his own life and the lives of the family members of his family by killing Ashok. Meanwhile, Mr. Ashok's family, back in the village, settles scores with the family members of Balram by having "Family of 17 Murdered in North Indian Village." He reads the news of murder in a newspaper and decides to lead a life of ignominy for a while "Just to be safe" (314) because his picture is all over the public places, among those being sought by the police. He is left scot-free even after looting and killing Ashok. Nevertheless, living under the shade of master's name, Balram as Ashok Sharma manages to set up a highly lucrative business, running a fleet of taxis to take late-night workers to their homes in Bangalore and becomes a self-proclaimed entrepreneur who calls himself "I'm tomorrow" (6). Inconsistent nature of the system not only provides him the propensity to become clairvoyant but also encourages him unearthing all possible routes that finally end in decadence. This revelation is a reflection of contemporary India showing that in this lawless world of uncertainty only The White Tiger like him can survive. However, the hazardous step taken by him is no doubt a dangerous trend leading to anarchy in our society but it, at the same time, falsifies the notion that India as a nation is shinning. Saxena rightly observes: The White Tiger protagonist exposes the rot in the three pillars of modern India - democracy, enterprise and justice-reducing them to the tired cliches 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 shinning and, despite its claims of a booming economy, it is still 'the near heart of darkness' which it has been since time immemorial. (Sunday Times of India)

The unity of a democratic nation appears to be in a mode of denial for there is no balance and poise in society in terms of opportunity and economic equality. The influence of globalization on democratic governance is so massive and big that the multinational companies seem to be all in all because they have free access to resources without any regulation. As a result of that, people are being looted without arms by the multinationals and, therefore, the rich is becoming richer and the poor remains stationary as if they were not the part of the process of shinning India's booming economy. These things have shown how pervasive and far-reaching have been various changes in people's outlook, which in turn turning down the notion of strong democracy, just because of its population and unaccountability, where economic prosperity of a few and visible poverty in abundance reside together. Lack of responsibility,

institutionalised politics and disappearance of faith in traditional values have made the conditions more chaotic and alarming than ever before. Democracy, too, finds itself on the crossroad waiting to go under suspended animation at times for there is no instant checkmate effort by its practitioners and followers, and living the nation in a situation where problems are more imaginable than solutions. This gives reason enough for a writer like Adiga to justify his position as a writer. Being a journalist by profession, he closely follows the people and society and this is what he has sketched on his canvas in black and white. He jots down the facts of the country into fiction so as to register his concerns before the reader seeking



affirmation and rational response. Without introspection and timely intervention, the country will see forming the habit of easy ways of making money in which many Balrams and Ashoks may emerge as a role model. The governing body of the nation in accordance with the people should join hands together in order to find some remedial measures for a proper solution of the malaise. No civilised society can tolerate the acts of Balram and Ashok.

Like most first novels, it is also not free from shortcomings. The novelist lacks some authenticity in presenting tradition and culture of the society. For instance, he portrays a funeral procession of Balram's mother led by Kusum, Balram's granny -a woman; and the people participated in that procession was chanting a slogan "Shiva's name is truth" (16). However, especially in Hindu religion, usually the participation of women in a funeral procession is treated as a sacrilege. The slogan used in the procession "Shiva's name is truth" is objectionable as traditionally the name of Lord Ram is used in northern India on such occasions -'Ram naam satya hai' (Ram's name is truth). This shows the writer's shallow understanding about the socio-cultural reality of the region along the River Ganga. Again, the way he has portrayed the region as the land of extreme poverty and the centre of depravity are somewhat implausible and misleading for they evince the absence of logical authenticity. While presenting the problems, the novelist becomes too much obsessed with the idea of corruption and poverty and that the logic of poetic license behind the portrayal seems giving way to a raw and unromanticized India. Whereas the country has witnessed a great deal of social, political and cultural changes after independence. Likewise, it has seen the rise and growth of those sections that had once no significant role to play in nation building programme. Therefore, such views of Adiga would definitely raise some amount of doubt in the mind of readers on these issues. Since this is his debut novel, these sorts of flaws are imaginable. In fact, the book's strength lies in its portrayal of characters and the riveting style of narration; its weakness is the story for its occasional pretensions.

Amidst all that, apart from these inadequacies and shortcomings, Adiga succeeds to arouse a healthy debate in a democratic nation like India where disagreement in democracy is an agreement on disagreement. Critics have the right to negate the novel for not presenting the picture of brave India or for showing disingenuousness in presentation but how can they disengage them from their rights and duties towards society? Adiga deserves due applause for reminding us of our rights and duties by telling a true tale of India Today. We may or may not agree to the novelist's views, but, in any case, we cannot refute his efforts by calling it a 'total flopperoo'² or it reads like a 'first draft of a Bollywood screenplay'. The inherent humanism, humour and rollicking satire that make the content of the novel worth reading; and thus becoming a living force of inspiration for its literary merits. To conclude, I would go with Gurcharan Das: "A book should not be judged on the basis of whether it creates a negative or positive picture of a country. It should be seen as a work of art and judged on its literary merits" (Times of India). If the novel has significance at all, it expresses the belief that what is called good and evil spring from the same source. Lawlessness, discord and violence are the price that has to be paid for failure to achieve self-knowledge and to live harmoniously. Passion and reason follow disastrously diverse laws. Adiga's The White Tiger is a true anatomy of deepening moral crisis in new India presented in fiction which is less a novel than a psychological drama in which the characters are the personified powers that lie underneath human nature, and the situation is such that it has turned sterling human values up-side down. Such insight into human experience as Adiga has is rare indeed. It is beyond analysis- it is the gift of genius..

Works Cited:

1. Noam Chomsky is an American linguist, educator, and political activist. He wrote on the subject during the 1960s in response to United States policies in Southeast Asia. Microsoft® Encarta® 2008.
2. John Sutherland called the novel "A total flopperoo for the Backer...". The Guardian.
3. Sameer Rahim dismissed the novel saying, "It reads like the first draft of a Bollywood screenplay. Every character is a cliche. The humour is bitter and unsubtle: the writing forgettable", The Daily Telegraph.