
CONTEMPORARY INDIA IN ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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The winner of the Man Booker Prize 2008 *The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga is basically a novel about the contemporary India, i.e. the globalised and deregulated India of 21st century. The novel amuses the reader but more than that it causes him great discomfort when he is taken through murky, unflattering, shocking and nauseously dirty snapshots of contemporary India which we all are living in but have purposefully turned a blind eye to. The novel leaves the reader curious and stunned at the same time. It is “a furious and brutally effective counterblast to smug "India is shining" rhetoric...It is certain of its mission, and pursues it with an undeviating determination you wouldn't expect in a first novel”(Robins). Some of these very characteristics, including furiousness, energy, effectiveness, certainty of mission and undeviating determination, make Arvind Adiga the Arvind Kejriwal of Indian literary scene. The story of the novel is told through different images which follow one after another in quick succession. The reader is never allowed to lower his guard and while going through these strangely disquieting images one wonders whether one is living in an independent country or in a post-colonial India which has not been able to break free from its colonial legacy. This ‘compelling and angry’ novel takes the reader on an unexpected journey to state in unequivocal terms that even today the colony continues in the form of the deprived, the downtrodden and the poor. Only the face of the colonizer has changed. This paper is a humble attempt to explore and understand the present-day Indian economic, societal and political set-up which runs on technology as well as on the blood of the poor. It seeks to analyze as to how Adiga gives a series of unpalatable pictures of contemporary India which is shining on the surface but is rotten to the core.

To describe the socio-economic and political realities, the novelist uses the painfully and darkly humorous metaphors of Darkness and Light. The narrator-cum-protagonist of the novel, Balram Halwai, comes from the village of Laxmangarh in the district of Gaya- the place where Lord Buddha sat under a tree, found his enlightenment and started Buddhism. To Balram “India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India- the black river” (The White Tiger, 14). The Ganga is a holy river for Indians and it has been a breeding place for Indian spiritualism. It is supposed to wash sins off the people who take a dip into it. It is supposed to give them enlightenment, wisdom, solace and salvation. Balram, on the contrary, finds that the plains on both the sides of river Ganga are in fact the India of Darkness which is plagued by all sort of exploitation, miseries, sufferings and diseases. It is the India where parents are so busy in their efforts to eke out a living that do not have any time to give names to their own children. Balram gets his name from his teacher on his first day in the school when he tells the teacher that his mother who “lies in bed and spews blood” (TWT, 13), his father who is a rickshaw puller, and his granny, aunts and uncles who are always busy in one way or the other, have had no time to name him. The teacher gives him this name only because there is no other Balram in the class. On hearing his son’s new name the father merely shrugs and says indifferently, “If it is what he wants, then we’ll call you that.” (TWT, 14)

Balram finds it interesting as well as appalling that the Ganga is called the river of emancipation and illumination but it flows across the area of darkness. It rather brings darkness to the lands it flows through. This darkness has only increased with the passage of time. This rebel of sorts remarks:

“Which black river am I talking of- which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it ?... Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness. (TWT, 15)

Balram shatters the romantic and sacred view of the Ganga when he writes to the Chinese premier urging him not to take a dip in the holy river which offers nothing but “a stench of decaying flesh” (TWT, 16). He says: “No!- Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids.” (TWT,15)

Balram also shatters the myth of sacred land, i.e., the Gangetic plains where Buddhism originated and then shaped the history of great nations like China. He means to say that the ideas of emancipation and spirituality attached to this land are illusory as “nothing would get liberated here” (TWT, 18). His village Laxmangarh is just a few miles away from Gaya but he finds the place so backward, corrupt and evil that he wonders if Buddha ever walked through Laxmangarh. Very humorously, he thinks, “My own feeling is that he ran through it- as fast as he could- and got to the other side- and never looked back” (TWT, 18). Here on this land the poor outnumber the rich in great numbers. Still, they allow the rich to exploit them in every possible way. The Darkness is ruled by four animals who live in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh. These landlords include the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven. The Buffalo moves in a car, keeps a gun on his lap and collects money, i.e. one-third of whatever they earn, from rickshaw- pullers and other labourers on daily basis. The Stork owns the river and takes a cut of every catch of fish by every fisherman. Also, he takes a toll from every

boatman who crosses the river to come to Laxmangarh. The Wild Boar has the control over all the good agricultural land around the village. Those who want to work on his lands must bow down to his feet and touch the dust under his slippers. They must also leave their women at his mercy. The Raven has acquired his name because of his habit of abusing the goatherds physically when they graze their flocks on his lands without paying money. The novelist means to say that it is because of this sort of all-round exploitation that the masses remain poor and they are forced to leave their homes to find work somewhere else. Balram says:

“Their children were gone, but the Animals stayed and fed on the village, and everything that grew in it, until there was nothing left for anyone else to feed on. So the rest of the village left Laxmangarh for food... When the buses came, they got on – packing the inside, hanging from the railings, climbing onto the roofs – and went to Delhi, Calcutta, and Dhanbad to find work... A month before the rains, the men came back... leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them... There was fighting, wailing and shrieking. (TWT, 26)

Adiga shows how a human body responds to its owner's financial health. A rich man's body would look “like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank” (TWT, 26). The labourers returning from Bombay, Calcutta, Delhi, Punjab and Haryana look lean and dark. Balram's father's spine is a knotted rope “the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells” (TWT, 27). Balram observes cuttingly that “the story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen. (TWT, 27)

At one place in the novel Balram gives the readers an uneasy but funny picture of the lives of women inside a house in a typical Indian village. He says:

“Once you walk into the house, you will see... the women. Working in the courtyard. ... One of them preparing the meal for the buffalo [buffalo being the most important member of any family in Darkness]; one winnowing rice; one squatting down, looking through the scalp of another woman, squeezing the ticks to death between her fingers. Every now and then they stop their work, because it is time to fight. This means throwing metal vessels at one another, or pulling each-other’s hair... At night they sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede. Men and boys sleep in another corner of the house.” (TWT, 20-21)

Moving out of the family domain, Adiga gives us a series of pictures exposing the shocking state of education in government schools and healthcare in state-run hospitals. Balram’s father, though a rickshaw puller, is very much aware of the liberating force of education. He wants his younger son, at least, to go to school. He goes to his son’s lizard infested school to find that the *paan* -and-spit teacher has made a sort of low, red wall-paper on the walls of the class room with his expectorate. When the teacher goes to sleep in the class itself, students steal *paan* from his pockets and distribute it among themselves. Then they imitate the teacher and take turns spitting at the already dirty walls. The teacher always reeks of booze and snores soundly in the classroom. There is a provision for free food for the students in the school but the teacher steals all lunch money and the food is never given to them. What is more, the teacher has a legitimate excuse as he has not been paid salary for the last six months. He undertakes a Gandhian protest when he takes a very conscious decision to do nothing in the class till he gets his pay cheque. Once a truck comes to the school with free uniforms for all the students but all the uniforms disappear and then appear after a week for sale in the neighbouring villages. Adiga shows how corruption has become a way of life in India when the villagers, instead of accusing the teacher of corruption, have the words of praise for him for his dare-devilry. Balram says:

“No one blamed the teacher for doing this. You can’t expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet. Everyone in the village knew that he would have done the same in his position. Some were even proud of him, for having got away with it so cleanly. (TWT, 33)

If schools are bad, hospitals in the Darkness are in worse shape. Their story is the story of utter rottenness. Balram’s father is dying of tuberculosis but there is no hospital in Laxmangarh. The fact, that there are three different foundation stones for a hospital in the village which have been laid by three different politicians before three different elections, states the case of political apathy and opportunism in starkly naked terms. When he is taken to a government hospital across the river, there is no doctor there to attend to him. The ward boy, after getting a bribe of ten rupees, reveals that the doctor could come in the evening. The beds have metal springs sticking out of them and there lives a cat too. The ward boy declares, “It is not safe in the rooms – the cat has tasted blood” (TWT, 48). We are told how system works even when no work is done. The post of medical superintendent is auctioned shamelessly to a senior doctor who shells out four hundred thousand rupees for it. He then allows all the junior doctors to remain absent from their duty and work in private hospitals in return of one-third of their salary. Expectedly, the doctor does not turn up. Balram’s father keeps spewing blood on the floor and thus breaths his last. Balram says:

“Around six o’clock that day, as the government no doubt accurately reported, my father was permanently cured of his tuberculosis. The ward boy made us clean up after Father before we could move the body. A goat came in and sniffed as we mopped our father’s infected blood off the floor.” (TWT, 50-51)

Adiga also shows how marriages in India play havoc with the lives of the poor. The girl’s family is “screwed hard” and almost every marriage taking place forces a child to give up his

schooling. When Balram's family takes a loan from Stork for a dowry, he leaves his school behind and starts working in a tea shop. Here his "entrepreneurial spunk" encourages him to work with total dishonesty and overhear the customers. He comes to learn that car drivers earn much more than the boys in a tea shop. His trainer tells him that every Indian road is a jungle where a driver must hurl abuses at others to express his authority. One must roar and honk needlessly as well as continuously to get ahead on the road. The trainer's advice to Balram makes an interesting reading:

"Mastering a car...is like taming a wild stallion – only a boy from the warrior castes can manage that. You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs – they are fighters, they can become drivers. You think sweet-makers can last long in fourth gear?"

India was ruled by outsiders for about a thousand years the reason of which, according to the novelist, lies in the servile nature and slave mentality of Indian masses. That is why people here worship gods who themselves served their "masters with absolute fidelity, love and devotion... Understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India" (TWT, 19). Hence, things changed only for the worse when this country got freedom. In a verbal picture Adiga compares ancient India to a clean, well-kept, orderly zoo. Once it was a great country and the richest nation on the earth. Different sections of the society were properly compartmentalized like animals in a zoo. Goldsmiths, cowherds, landlords did their allotted job; halwai made sweets and untouchables cleaned faeces. Then came August 1947 and the British left. The cages were opened and the zoo turned into a jungle which is the contemporary India. Balram Observes:

"...the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each-other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies...anyone with a belly could rise up...To sum up – in the

old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up.

The USA Today has rightly observed that “*The White Tiger* is one of the most powerful books I've read in decades. His India is a merciless, corrupt Darwinian jungle where only the ruthless survive. This is an amazing and angry novel about injustice and power” (Donahue). There are many more images of modern-day India which amuse the reader at one time but send a shiver down his spine at another. Balram’s vote is sold by the shopkeeper to a political party without seeking his opinion. His father is not allowed to cast his vote even once during the twelve elections he sees. Election fever is like a disease in the country and helpless people who discuss elections enthusiastically are compared to “eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra” (TWT, 98). Politicians like the Great Socialist have dozens of criminal cases of all types pending against them but due to deep-rooted corruption in judiciary convictions do not happen. Government itself sells magazines like the Murder Weekly to engage the attention of drivers and servants to protect their masters from being killed. Every new business man makes the earlier look a saint. When a master kills a poor child on the road, the servant is forced to sign an affidavit, own the crime and undergo imprisonment for no fault of his own. The society is a rooster coop where the hens and roosters watch their brothers being butchered in front of their eyes and they know they are next. Yet they do not rebel and try to get out of the coop. Balram writes to Chinese premier:

“Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr Jiabao. A handful of man in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; 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.

(TWT, 175-176)

To sum up, one may say that the novelist seems to be an angry philosopher who wants some sort of revolution to take place. He conveys his message with the help of a number of scenes, situations and verbal images which are telling, revealing, cutting, thought-provoking as well as darkly humorous. In his review of the novel Vijay Nair aptly remarked that "nothing escapes the Adiga scanner. *The White Tiger* is not a comfort book but it was never designed to make its readers sleep in peace. And it is as literary as they get, never mind the easy readability factor. Because it is simple on surface, the complexities and the paradoxes contained in the book are more interesting to grapple with' (The Hindu).

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