

An Examination of Contemporary Social Problems in Arvind Adiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract:

The current research paper does an excellent job of showing the social problems in the novel. The novel is written in a letter format by Balram Halwai to the Minister of China. The Minister of China is going to India soon. The White Tiger is all about minimal awareness in which the main character, Balram tells us his life story. The character, Balram of the story is a figurative voice of the poor class represented as a 'rooster coop'. Balram, The White Tiger has no companions. He is marked as an underprivileged class hero. He is getting freedom from old slavery and misuse. The central character was born in a big, impoverished family belonging to the caste of Halwai. The village of Balram is under the control and exploitation of four landlords. Balram is now conscious of his class. He passes from riches to rags due to his education. Education acts as a liberating force for him. Arvind Adiga has portrayed the fight of the underprivileged to be free from social restrictions imposed on them by the upper class. He rightly sends a message that the marginalized are not just motionless waiting for betterment and rights.

Keywords: society, global, country, village, etc

Introduction:

Indian English literature has been by and large dynamically facing challenges in the process of the country building. The country aimed at internalizing its strength by diehard against its own vices in the economic and political life as well as social and cultural issues. The novel, The White Tiger, is seen to be focusing on a much larger discussion related to the social issues against the backdrop of the expected global development. The novel powerfully brings out the huge gap between the poor and rich. The poor are, on the one hand, dwelling in filthy localities, living in worn-out basements, being close to slums that are next to every decent area and having to be content with decoy whores whereas, on the other hand, the rich are doing shopping in exclusive malls, living in spacious apartments, having offices in high-rise buildings symbolizing industrial growth and are even able to bargain for honey-blond prostitutes.

Aravind Adiga is the recipient of the Booker Prize Award. He was awarded the Man Booker Prize for fiction with his debut novel, The White Tiger, in 2008. He was born in Chennai in 1974 and moved to Mangalore (India) during his childhood. He studied at both Magdalen College, Oxford and Columbia University, New York. Adiga is the author of three novels: The White Tiger, Between the Assassinations, and Last Man in Tower. The first deals with the problems faced by the newly liberated Indian villages focusing on the social issues. The second one deals with the stories of the Assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, while the last one is about the struggle and resist for real estate in Mumbai. He has published four short stories as well: The Sultan's Battery, Smack, Last Christmas in Bandra, and The Elephant.

Discussion:

Aravind Adiga is one of the modern Indian writers who portray the struggle against the current economic, social, and cultural exploitation, political deficiency, and the spiritual suppression of the poor in India. He presents both the oppressed, miserable, dark corners and the highly developed cities like Bangalore and Delhi. As usual, the very common, the negligible, are pushed to the edges and borders of the power center. They always suffer for their daily food. In today's world, marginality is the category for social issues, where the poor people are constantly fighting to gain access to resources and full participation in the social life. The underprivileged are generally the ones that suffer from suppression, discrimination, and at times neglect by the society based on their religion, ethnicity, education, race, gender, and occupation as well as social status

The story is narrated through epistolary exchanges from Balram Halwai to the Premier of China. The Premier of China will soon be traveling to India. The White Tiger is centered on trivial consciousness where the lead character, Balram lives up to his name, telling his life story to Mr. Wen Jiabao, the Premier of China, in 7 nights from his desk which is at the root of a revolt of the poor against the society, culture and values created by the power centre. Balram, the son of Vikram Halwai, is the hero of the story, who starts off as a rickshaw puller and born in the darkest corner of India, Laxmangarh in the Gaya district. He was born under the occupation and depressed conditions of his family. His area was under the control of the landlords. He reveals the bright future of the two countries through his writing in the following lines:

“... speaks directly between the two contenders for
the future for the world in the century of the yellow
and the brown man. You and Me” (*The White Tiger* 5).

Balram holds a strong belief in his rare trait, comparing himself to a “White Tiger” who is not attached to the outdated morals or social expectations. He was a bright boy but nevertheless had to drop out of school to earn a living. In this regard, he has always been contrary to the mainstream, as he was able to acquire knowledge through informal means. His ability to do so comes from the fact that he has been listening in on conversations and gathering information from sources far and near. Growing from the bottom of the working class society up to being a driver for Mr. Ashok and the Stork brought him a great deal of hatred towards the upper class people which ultimately led to him committing the murder of Mr. Ashok. He also goes by the names of Munna, *The White Tiger* and Ashok Sharma.

The main character, Balram, grew up in a big, impoverished family belonging to the Halwai caste. His village is overrun and taken advantage of by the four landlords called the Stork, the Wily Boar, the Raven, and the Buffalo. When Balram was still a baby, his mother passed away and little Balram’s father was a rickshaw puller. The family, in the beginning, referred to him simply as “Munna,” since they did not give him any name at all. His only other name was given when his schoolmaster named him Balram. In such a poor and unkind society, young boys are not allowed to have proper names. And the parents do not care about the children’s names either. Balram remarks:

“mother’s very ill.....she lies in bed and spews
blood. She’s got no time to name and father is a
rickshaw puller...he’s got no big loan from Stork
who in lieu of that demanded all members of the
family to work for him (*The White Tiger* 38).

Balram not only proved to be consistent but also remarkable. One day the school inspector praised him as a White Tiger in front of the teachers and fellow students. This is how he gets his symbolic pen-name which signifies completely a new side and his new position at school as well as outside. Unfortunately, Balram is taken out of the school and compelled to do hard work in a coal mine and at a tea shop where he is receiving the best education. He began to educate himself by listening in to the conversations of the customers at the tea shop. It is very significant to point out that there are still a lot of children in India who do not get the chance to finish their school education because of caste and cultural conflict, economic inequality, poverty, dowry, superstitions, zamindari system, and so many other social evils. Throughout the novel, Balram behaves and shows up as if he were the one. His journey from a poor boy to a rich entrepreneur is a journey from darkness to light. He says it once:

The journey from Darkness to the Light is not
smooth.....only a White Tiger can do this
(*The White Tiger*, 250).

Balram attains class consciousness. Education is the primary factor that transforms him from a poor person to a rich person.

He is freed by education, which he sees as an instrument of liberation. He absorbs knowledge from the society around him, from his travels, from his own personal experiences, and from seeing others’ lives. His move to the multinational company makes him realize that the city is also divided; he is in the capital of two different Indias, without expectation. Balram sees two Indias: the first is the light of urban coastal India and the second is the poverty and darkness of rural inner continent India. The Indian underclass is kept in a perpetual state of slavery by a mechanism that he terms the rooster coop. It is a combination of an attitude that the underclass enforces upon itself and the conscious tactics of the upper class.

“India is two countries into one, India of Light
and an India of Darkness. Ocean brings light
to my county. Every place on the map of India
near the ocean is well off but the river brings
darkness to India” (*The White Tiger* 14).

In the dark, Balram clarifies the politically corrupt scenario at full length. One politician popularly referred to as the great socialist is in charge of the darkness through election rigging. The Stork family, which is engaged in under-the-table transactions in the coal business, has to bribe the great socialist time and again to ensure their victory. It is imperative to understand India’s class system in order to grasp the social reality represented in the novel. The

class system is a social and economic system in which certain people categorized as lower class are denied the right to receive social and economic upliftment and are hence compelled to work as laborers. When it comes to class systems, the novel has mainly focused on the most dominant and wide-ranging in representing the lower class who are characterized by isolation and unfriendliness, deprivation and deficiency, subordination and oppression, silence and resignation, neglect and resilience. They have been made subordinate in terms of gender, class, caste, and age. The White Tiger brings to the forefront different evils like unemployment, poverty, corruption, and so on, which were rampant in the society at that time. The novel depicts the horrific reality of Indian society in the recent past. The novel, *The White Tiger*, is set against the backdrop of an economic explosion in India that has resulted in a gigantic divide between the rich and the poor.

Balam, the protagonist of the novel, is a representative voice of the lower class symbolically depicted as a rooster coop. Balam, *The White Tiger* has no friends. He is labeled as a deprived class hero. The protagonist is struggling to liberate from age old slavery and misuse. His rise from a poor village boy to successful industrialist is not at all simple but hard line struggle to liberate from vicious circle of the class system. His struggle starts at a very young age when his father borrows a loan from the village landlord for the marriage of his cousin sister Reena. As a result all members of the family work for the landlord, Stork. While working in tea shop, Balam nourishes a vision of escape from the socioeconomic imprisonment. He always feels that he is not made for all this. He is deeply encouraged by his father's lines. His father says:

"My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey.
All I want is that one of my mines – at least one
should live like a man" (*The White Tiger* 46).

As part of their emancipation, Balam and his brother go job hunting from Laxamangarah (Gaya) to Delhi. Balam's re-education of life begins in the city. Balam takes driving lessons and skillfully presents himself as a chauffeur for Stork's daughter-in-law Pinky Madam and son Ashok Shrama. He takes every chance to show his affection and loyalty to gain his master's goodwill. His integrity and esteem for Pinky Madam and Ashok can be clearly perceived through his own words. He states:

"I would drive whenever they wanted, as faithfully as
the servant God Hanuman carried about his master and
mistress, Ram and Sita" (*The White Tiger*, 173-174).

Despite the fact that he was honest and witty in his dealings, he still couldn't get over the fact that his wages were low.

The trio of life's essentials which were shelter, food and individuality were the main issues for them. Balam's misfortunes were plenty, so he resolved not to be like his father who died in the hospital waiting for the doctor to come. Even today it is not easy for a low caste person in India to get a job easily.

Balam got a lot of rejections from different landlords and employers. His great chance comes when a wealthy landlord hires him as a driver. Balam gets a ticket to the outside world and no more customs, caste or cultural inferiority. Mr. Ashok, who is also the child of the same land where Balam was born and raised, but they both turn out to be ten opposite poles of the equal society. Mr. Ashok, educated, rich and a significant person in society on the one hand, while Balam, the least educated, poor and insignificant person on the other hand. One day Mr. Ashok expresses:

"His eyes seemed full of wonder! How could
two such contrasting specimens of humanity
be produced by the same soil, sunlight and
water" (*The White Tiger* 80)?

Poverty brings about everything negative that it can, untruthfulness, corruption, dishonesty, and dissolute behaviour. The lack of money makes everyone bad in this novel. Adiga shows the readers through many examples how people behave when money is totally absent. He performs the last rites for the family members after coming to Bangalore so that they do not appear in his dreams. He prays for all his nephews, aunts, nieces, cousins, and even the buffalo. He thinks of the soul of his granny Kusum and brother Kishan and prays to God to let him live in peace. He is very emotional and social. So when he reads the story of the murder of a family of seventeen in a north Indian village, he throws the newspaper in disgust and stops reading newspapers for a few months.

Arvind Adiga has portrayed the fight of poor people to break free from social restrictions imposed on them by the upper class as a struggle for liberation. Balam Halwai, the main character, is the representative of the changing psychological make-up of the Indian underclass. And the lower class no longer wants to live in misery and poverty but is demanding the right to participate in the race of life and to get rid of the age-old caste hierarchy. The character's irritation, negativity, anger, and protest, his excessive spending on criminal acts, drinking, and taking all chances portray the very inner frustration and its reaction against the class system or social evils. Arvind Adiga vividly depicts the social problems in the novel and conveys the idea that in the narrative of India's growth the role of the underclass is crucial. He strongly advocates for a society that is free of restrictions and without classes.

Conclusion:

With the novel, *The White Tiger*, Arvind Adiga not only highlights the self-conscious components of the community but also warns the powerful ones to be cautious. He really points out the problems connected with the underprivileged people's social conditions. He clearly conveys the message that the underprivileged are stagnant

waiting for their upliftment and rights. If the oppression and control continue for long they may turn out to be criminals.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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