

Metamorphoses of Master-Servant Relationship in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract – With the award of the popular Man Booker Prize for Fiction in 2008 to Aravind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger*, a master-servant relationship stressing darker picture of Indian social life became noticeable. *The White Tiger* is a novel about two Indias "in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (p. 14). This paper attempts to seek out the prevalent system of hierarchy among the Indian social class and how Adiga deals with the same. The story of fictional relationship between Balram Halwai and his master, Mr. Ashok, exposes the divide of poor and rich in the set of economic prosperity. Michael Portillo commented that the novel "shocked and entertained in equal measure" (Portillo, 2008). The divide between the haves and have nots may have a precarious effect if it is unresolved. Though the poor in India hasn't revolted against mean behavior and exploitation by the rich people, there is an undercurrent of resentment and who knows when this suppressed emotion is transformed into revolution?

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, Indian Fiction, *The White Tiger*, Class Consciousness, Caste Issues.

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INTRODUCTION

The *White Tiger* is written in the epistolary form and it is a seven-part letter to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. The novel gives a picture of India's social struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration by Balram Halwai, a village boy. With the journey of Balram from a have not to one who has powers to manipulate the system, the novel is an examination of questions as poverty, caste, corruption, loyalty, and religion. The novel also deals with the ethics of rural India and urban India. As Aravind Adiga himself says his novel "attempts to catch the voice of men you meet as you travel through India- the voice of the colossal underclass." The *White Tiger* is fictional account of how the protagonist, the son of a puller, becomes a successful businessman. This paper primarily concerns the "visible" slavery practiced everyday by the servants and lower class and caste people in India. The Rooster Coop that Balram tries to escape is not made of thin bars but one must have the courage and intelligence of a white tiger to break out of it.

This is not the first time that a dark picture of Indian society is portrayed in a novel, but it has been done several times possibly starting with Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*. The *White Tiger* gained critical appraisal with the award of Booker Prize for Fiction. One of the many reasons for the critical appraisal of the novel is its departure from the Rushdiesque creative tradition.

The novel has also been compared with Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Critics and scholars have highlighted the fact that both novels reflect a duality of rich and poor, master and servant, powerful and oppressed. Protagonists in both took a turn to violence to escape the dehumanizing behavior of their masters.

To an extent, the philosophy of Frantz Fanon has influenced Adiga. In his landmark work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), he writes that revolutionary violence is a constructive way for the liberation and self-expression of colonized people. Fanon notes three stages that postcolonial writers go through: the assimilation stage, the adaptation stage, and the fight stage. The fighting stage is that when the produces a revolutionary and national literature. According to this matrix of Fanon, *The White Tiger* is a novel of third stage. Ashok's murder by Balram is an act that testifies Fanon's philosophy of constructive violence.

Gayatri Spivak draws attention to the voiceless subalterns in her landmark work- *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Her subalterns are day-laborers, homeless, and unemployed. And this is the same class to which Balram's father, a rickshaw puller, belongs.

Amidst the growing economic prosperity of India in the recent past, Balram Halwai is presented as the hero of modern India. He is representative of the

poor yearning for their 'tomorrow'. The journey of Balram from rural Bihar to Gurgaon to Bangalore highlights the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor. Small minority in Indian economic system holds the major part of its material prosperity. "At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society... the great divide" (Raaj, 2008, p. 9).

Only a small group of people are benefited from the neo-liberal economic changes in policies of the last decade. Large population of the country remains in the same conditions. They are vulnerable to every kind of discrimination at the hands of powerful people. Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze examine in their paper entitled "Democratic Practice and Social Inequality in India" the effect of democracy in contemporary India. How democracy in India failed to destabilize to social inequality, though democratic practice can be a powerful tool for elimination of social inequality. There are millions of children malnourished in India according to the UN report and their numbers are highest in India as compared to other countries. One-third of the world's poors live in India.

Balram has a job of chauffer with Ashok, a landlord's son, and his wife Pinky. Before that he lived in a rural village of Laxmangarh with his grandmother, parents, brother and others. He was a smart child but forced to leave school in order to help his family. When he was a young boy, he was given the moniker "white tiger" because he was the only intelligent, honest, and vivacious among a jungle of thugs and idiots. After learning how to drive, he starts driving for Ashok and his wife Pinky. The narrator himself phrases his life's story entitled "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian" (p. 10):

Me and thousands others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas [...] - all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (pp. 10-11)

It proves crucial to Balram to reject the philosophy of radical Hindutva to rise from poverty and oppression through ruthless self-interestedness. He rebukes Hinduism for the oppression of the poor and resisting the social progress of India. He finds the doctrines of servitude in Hinduism very regressive:

[...] Do you know about Hanuman, Sir? He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion. These are the kinds of gods they foisted on us, Mr. Jiabao. Understand, now, how

hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India. (p. 16)

Balram does not only criticize the teachings of Hinduism, but also the economic corruption in India. He is a many time witness of the bribes that government officials to escape the tax. Corruption is one of the major issues that cause the socio-economic disparity in India. On the one hand, Ashok gives bribe in millions to escape tax, on the other hand, Balram is insulted for misplacing one rupee in an incident. So there are two Indias:

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. (p. 54)

After murdering Ashok, Balram doesn't feel any self doubt or guilt. He held it necessary for the cause of humanity and access to the resources. He thinks that the money he has stolen after murdering Ashok does not belong to Ashok, because the tax Ashok was escaping from was to be used for the welfare of the ordinary people. So what he did was the thrust of the hour, he claims:

[...] 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 servant. (p. 276)

The money seems sufficient to him to begin a new life with a new business. Ashok confesses to Balram: "My way of living is all wrong, Balram. I know it, but I don't have the courage to change it. I just don't have... the balls.... 'I let people exploit me, Balram. I've never done what I've wanted, my whole life" (pp. 237-8).

It may be an ideal view that government should take strong action against the economic corruption, illiteracy, farming crisis, but without sorting out these kinds of issues India cannot avoid more Balrams to come forward and take their share even in a violent way. It is a fine commentary on the social and economic inequality in India. Balram is a representative of the have nots community, while Ashok and Pinky represent the upper class of society and all of them seem to justify their thoughts through their actions. If everyone play his/her role in the system honestly, we can avoid more Ashoks and Balrams to happen and a prosperous life for all can be expected. A corrupt system that fails to provide justice to its citizens is one of the reasons for poverty and resentment among the common people. When that poverty and resentment cross the line of tolerance, people who suffer may take their violent revenge. But before that happens Indian policy makers and intellectuals should seriously think about the existing welfare

schemes and it should be made sure that every welfare scheme is formed and enacted taking the last human being into consideration. Poverty and huge disparity in social and economic status among the common masses is the biggest hindrance to India's progress.

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