Scholar Critic
AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE,
LITERATURE AND CULTURE STUDIES
(TRIANNUAL REFEREED, OPEN ACCESS, ONLINE & PRINT JOURNAL)
Volume-1 Issue-3 December 2014

Honorary Editor
Prof. T. Nageswara Rao
Editor
Dr. B. Siva Nagaiah

www.scholarcritic.com
Aaravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*: A Tale of Two Indias

Pranayaja Talluri
Jr. Lecturer in English
APRJC, Vijayapuri South, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

Compelling, angry and darkly humorous, *The White Tiger* is an unexpected journey into a new India. Aaravind Adiga is a talent to watch.

-Mohsin Hami
(Author of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

**Abstract**: Aaravind Adiga is widely appreciated for adding new feathers to the cap of Indian Literature in English and at the same time he has continuously been a victim of bitter and unrelenting criticism. He is accused of exaggerating India’s poverty and corruption and of projecting a too dark picture of the area marked as ‘darkness’. Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) is a powerful, social commentary on injustice and class struggle in India. It portrays the anti-hero, Balram Halwai, who represents the subaltern section of society juxtaposed against the rich. It is a simple story full of wit and black humour, aiming a direct attack at the system of democracy in India. The novel is a confession of and a series of seven letters written over seven nights by a self taught entrepreneur called Balram Halwai or the white tiger of the title. Balram is the murderess protagonist of the novel. He writes his epistles to the premier of China Wen Jiabao. He unfolds the saga of his rise. He exposes the danger that looms large—the backlash seems to caution the smug ruling class which has fattened itself at the expense of the poor and the depressed in society that the subalterns are watching and learning the same tactics which the former has used to exploit them. The novel is an outsider’s rather than insider’s viewpoint.

**Keywords**: Poverty, corruption, new India, epistles, underdogs, exploitation, subalterns.

There is a galaxy of writers who have established themselves as significant writers in India. To enlist them Anita Desai, Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh and Aravind Adiga are in forefront and called as the most celebrated Indian English writers. Aravind Adiga is accused of selling an inauthentic picture of Indian poverty to the western market for coming into the limelight. Adiga got the Man Booker Prize in 2008 for his debut novel, *The White Tiger*. The
novel is an epistolary novel. Balram Halwai, a servant turned entrepreneur, narrates his unethical story to Wen Jiabao, the Premier of China, who plans to visit India and wants to know the secrets of the success of the Indian entrepreneurs. The protagonist belongs to Laxmangarh, a remote village in Bihar. He is the son of an impoverished rickshaw-puller, Vikram Halwai. He is a servant, a car-driver, an entrepreneur and a murderer rolled into one. The novel begins with a strong note of sarcasm:

Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every aspect, except that you don’t have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the field of technology. And these entrepreneurs — we entrepreneurs — have set up all these outsourcings that virtually run America now.

You hope to learn how to make a few Chinese entrepreneurs, that’s why you’re visiting. That made feel good. But then it hit me that in keeping with international protocol, the prime minister and foreign minister of my country will meet you at the airport with garlands, small take-home sandalwood statues of Gandhi, and a booklet full of information about India’s past, present, and future. (pp.4-5)

The story runs on a few binary concepts like darkness and the light, the prosperity and the penury, the progress and the underdevelopment and the honesty and dishonesty. Laxmangarh is called the darkness. Broken water-taps, lean and short children with over-sized heads, families of pigs sniffing through sewage are common sights in Laxmangarh. Balram inhabits the darkness, a place where basic necessities are routinely snatched by the capitalist class that live in light. Adiga exposes the dark sides of our nation, the wretched pathetic lives of the poor, their agony and suffering in a sardonic manner. The characters in this novel may be fictitious, but such ill-fated people are seen everywhere. Satendra Kumar says:

Adiga is a real writer—that is to say, someone who forges an original voice and vision. There is the voice of Halwai—witty, pithy, and ultimately psychopathic. ¹
The people living in the darkness are a subaltern group. Darkness is symbolic of ignorance, poverty, illiteracy, backwardness. Adiga, through the letters of Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier articulates the subaltern experiences. Balram confesses through his first letter that:

> Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness. (p.14)

Balram’s father, Vikram Halwai dies of tuberculosis on the floor of a government hospital, waiting for some doctor to see him, spitting blood on this wall and that. The age-old divide between the rich and the poor takes a heavy toll on people who bear the brunt of poverty; leading impoverished lives. Balram reveals the plight of schools in the darkness by Balram’s childhood experience of attending school as Munna. On the first day the teacher asks his name and he says nobody at home has time to name him. He is called ‘Munna’ which is no name and means only a boy. It was the school master who gave him the name Balram. Balram received his primary education in the village school where the inspector once came on a surprise visit and put a question to him. The incident is narrated as follows:

> The inspector pointed his cane straight at me. ‘You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?’

I thought about it and said:

> ‘The white Tiger.’

> ‘That’s what you are, in this jungle.’

Before he left, the inspector said, ‘I’ll write to Patna asking them to send you a scholarship. You need to go to a real school – somewhere far away from here. You need a real uniform, and a real education.’

He had a parting gift for me – a book. I remember the title very well: **Lessons for Young boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi**.

So that’s how I became the White Tiger. There will be a fourth and a fifth name too, but that’s late in the story. (p.35)
Though he is called the white tiger by the inspector of schools, identifying his shrewdness, he has to stop his learning in the middle of as his family has taken a big loan from the ‘stork’ so they could have a lavish wedding and a lavish dowry for his cousin (sister). The landlord family who control the village, its land and people are rightly called ‘The Buffalo’, ‘The Stork’, ‘The Wild Boar’, ‘The Raven’ by Balram, according to the characteristics that they show. In his childhood, Balram (Munna), is forcibly taken out of school to work as a tea-shop boy to repay the loan taken by the family for the marriage of his sister. Laxmangarh is inhabited by two classes i.e the landlords and the labourers. The wealth and resources are owned by the landlords and the poor people are at their mercy. They are exploited by the landlords in every possible way. Halwai is the victim of the corruption from his childhood. His school teacher does not give food to the students and steals entire lunch money. Balram is dropped out of school to bear the burden of the loan that is incurred by his family to marry of his sisters. He starts working in a tea shop, smashing coals, wiping tables; he gives himself better education than he could have at any school. Instead of wiping out spots from tables and crushing coals for the oven, Balram uses his time at the tea shop to spy on every customer at every table, and overhears everything they said. He decides that this was how he would keep his education going forward. In his letter to the Premier of China, Balram says:

Go to a tea shop anywhere along 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 in tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still ‘boys’. But this is your fate if you do your job well – with honesty, dedication, and sincerity, the way Gandhi would have done it, no doubt.

I did my job with near total dishonesty, lack of dedication, and insincerity – and so the tea shop was a profoundly enriching experience. (p.51)

Adiga, with irony and humour describes the schools in rural India, or we can say government schools all over the country. As per the government programmes, the students should be given mid-day meals, free uniforms and books. But these things never reach them. The following lines give the picture of education system in Indian villages:
There was supposed to be free food at my school – a government programme gave every boy three \textit{rotis}, yellow \textit{daal}, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never ever saw \textit{rotis}, or yellow \textit{daal}, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money…No one blamed the schoolteacher 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. (p.33)

The students are so underfed and so under-clad that, they stared in awe at the inspector’s blue safari during the school inspection. In the human jungle of darkness, Balram really appears a white tiger and tries to fulfil his father’s ambition by learning, reading and writing. Cast-based occupations still play an important role among the people of India. Balram’s caste and occupation make him a subaltern. He cannot make him free from the caste prejudices of the rich. Balram observes class discrimination at the village tea shop. The rich and higher castes are offered plastic chairs; and low castes, rickshaw-pullers and daily wage earners sit on the ground in squatting position. Poverty is the root cause of all the evils. Balram is determined to fight against this inequality, as an underdog. After the death of his father, Balram comes to Dhanbad along with his brother Kasim and his cousin Dilip and picks up the humble job of a servant in a tea shop. The life of Balram turns a new leaf when he is appointed a chauffeur by a landlord of Laxmangarh for his son, daughter-in-law and his two pomerian dog’s cuddles and puddles. Balram gets his break when Mr. Ashok, a rich man hires him as a chauffeur and takes him to live in Delhi, where he could find enough food in the house for the servants and special dish on Sundays. Balram says:

As far as masters go, Mr Ashok, Mukesh Sir, and the Stork were better than nine in ten. There was always enough food in the house for the servants. On Sundays you even got a special dish, rice mixed with small red chunks of boneless chicken. I had never had a regular chicken dish in my life until then; it made you feel like a king, eating chicken Sunday after Sunday and then licking your fingers. I had a covered room to sleep in. True, I had to share it with the other driver, a grim-looking fellow named Ram Persad, and he had the nice big bed, while I had sleep on floor – still a covered room’s a covered room, and much nicer than sleeping on the road, as Kishan and I had been doing all the time we were in Dhanbad. Above all, I got the thing that
we who grow up in the Darkness value most of all. A uniform. A khaki uniform!

(pp.67-68)

Mr Ashok has two drivers, Ram Persad and Balram. He is very fond of pomp and show and everything gorgeous. He resides in a lovely old mansion. His wife is Pinky, a Christian, in America and now is living in India. Ram Persad, a Muslim by birth, works as a senior driver and a servant in Stork’s house, for his daily bread. Halwai, who wants to be a servant one and drive Honda City, reveals Ram Persad’s secret out of professional jealousy. This is how Mohammed becomes Ram Persad:

‘Now, this Mohammed Mohammad was a poor, honest, hardworking Muslim, but he wanted a job at the home of an evil, prejudiced landlord who didn’t like Muslims – so, just to get a job and feed his starving family, he claimed to be a Hindu! And took the name Ram Persad.’ (p.109)

Ram Persad always teases Halwai and does not allow him to use his bed and his master’s Honda City. Ram Persad's identity is revealed. Balram gets Ram Persad's position of servant one and drives Honda City. Prior to this Balram held a subaltern place i.e a secondary place of being new in the household and being driver number two. The Nepali servant shouts at Balram:

‘Don’t pull the chain so hard! They’re worth more than you are!’ (p.78)

The servant quarters were in awful condition, the doorway extremely small, meant for underfed and under-nourished people, ceiling was peeling off in flakes, there were spider webs and the room was smelly and closed. Vijay Nair says:

The White Tiger traverses the familiar territory of class and caste divide, poverty and exploitation and the triumph of the human spirit that one expects in a book that unfolds from a place called ‘darkness’ in Bihar and draws its protagonist from an impoverished family of rickshaw-pullers who were in the business of making sweets before fate intervened.

Mr Ashok and his wife Pinky are convinced that Balram is the most religious servant on earth. Balram cheats his employer. He siphons his petrol. He took his car to a corrupt mechanic who
 billed him for work that was not necessary. While driving back to his master’s residence, he picked up a paying customer. Balram says:

> To sum up – in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there were just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.

And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up. (p.64)

Halwai believes in two fundamental laws of jungle; struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. Halwai sees two types of life in Delhi. He remarks:

> Remember, Mr Premier, that Delhi is the capital of not one but two countries – two Indias. The Light and the Darkness both flow in to Delhi. Gurgaon, where Mr Ashok lived is the bright, modern end of the city, and this place, old Delhi, is the other end. Full of things that the modern world forgot all about – rickshaws, old stone buildings, and Muslims. (p.251)

Halwai is confused and flabbergasted when he looks at the development in New Delhi. But he learns how to live there. Though he faces several insults in the beginning, he learns to live in poverty and reaches to the place which he dreams of. He learns the art of bribing, cheating the master by siphoning the petrol from the car, consuming cheap liquor. Sebastian opines:

> He is educated in the mean ways of the rich which he imbibes himself in course of time. Balram, a victim of rich-poor divide reverses the role, becomes the master like servant. When he is alone he takes pleasure in masochisms.³

Balram comes to the conclusion that the major difference is not of colour, caste or any other thing but money. Unlike his father and brother who continue behaving as feudal lords, Ashok treated the servant class with sympathy and sometimes he also appeared reluctant to bribe the ministers for a smooth running of their family business. The patronage of Mr Ashok infuses new hope and courage in him. He thinks of the city. Driving his master to shopping malls and call centres, he becomes increasingly aware of immense wealth and opportunity all around him; while knowing that he will never be able to gain success to that world. The novelist presents the novel in the form of a dramatic monologue; in the tradition of Albert Camus’s *The Fall.*
novel studies the contrast between India’s rise as a modern global economy and the main character, which comes from rural poverty. Though Ashok was sympathetic to Balram, others in the family used to humiliate him, generating there by a secret grudge against the master-class in Balram’s mind. Once Ashok’s wife Pinky took the driver’s wheel from Balram and ran over a boy. But Balram was forced to give a written confession that he drove the car that hit an unidentified person. Though luckily for him, there was no police case and Balram could escape imprisonment. The incident increased his anger and hatred for the master-class people. Michael Portillo, who chaired the panel of judges for the Man Booker Prize told that the novel is as disturbing as it is entertaining that the book has changed his view of India through its true picture of poverty in India. Many European critics supported this view and praised Adiga’s courageous attempt to reveal the dark picture, a completely different one from the picture of ‘shining India’ advertised in different sectors. Ashok and his brother Mukesh are tax evaders. They pay off the government and couple of bureaucrats to save their skin. Ashok bribes all the politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he was to pay. Ashok knew it very well that this illegal way of getting exempted of income tax is meant for depriving the country of development the expenses of which are met through the taxes collected from the citizens. There seems to be much difference between the theory he uttered and the practice. Once Ashok caught Balram by collar and called him names after he learnt that Balram had taken Pinky to the airport. Adiga describes that incident:

He pushed me harder against the balcony; my head and chest were over edge now, and if he pushed me even a bit more I was in a real danger of flying over. I gathered my legs and kicked him in the chest – he staggered back and hit the sliding glass door between the house and the balcony; he sat down against the glass door. The two of us were panting.

‘You can’t blame me, sir!’ I shouted. ‘I’d never heard of a woman leaving her husband for good! I mean, yes, on TV, but not in real life! I just did what she told me to.’

A crow sat down on the balcony and cawed. Both of us turned and stared at it.

Then his madness was over. He covered his face in his hands and began to sob. (pp.182-183)
One day Mr Ashok went to foreign prostitute in a big hotel. Balram is an eyewitness to it. Ashok maintains double standards. Balram says:

Taking the golden-haired woman with him, the fat man went up to the hotel reception, where the manager greeted him warmly. Mr Ashok walked behind them and kept looking from side to side, like a guilty little boy about to do something very bad.

Half an hour passed. I was outside, my hands on the wheel the whole time. I punched the little ogre. I began to gnaw at the wheel.

I kept hoping he’d come running out, arms flailing, and screaming, Balram, I was on the verge of making a mistake! Save me – let’s drive away at once!

An hour later Mr Ashok came out of the hotel – alone, and looking ill.

‘The meeting’s over, Balram,’ he said, letting his head fall back on the seat. ‘Let’s go home.’ (p.219)

Balram frankly admits his master Ashok, who is his ideal and whose footprints he followed was also tempted to indulge in romance with another girl other than his legitimate wife one day he did romance with Ms. Uma, he spent more time. The story of Balram’s progress from a humble naive village lad to a man with tall ambition is highly tantalizing. As Macbeth’s ambition could not have been fulfilled without removing King Duncan from his way so Balram’s ambition could not have been fulfilled without killing his master Ashok. He was eagerly awaiting the golden opportunity. Ashok’s wife, Pinky leaves him and goes back to America. Ashok’s love, Uma wants him to replace Balram sniffs the news of his replacement. Balram is driving a car with his master Ashok has withdrawn a heavy amount from many banks. The amount withdrawn from the banks is seven hundred thousand rupees. Balram thought:

We went from bank to bank, and the weight of the red bag grew. I felt its pressure increase on my lower back – as if I were talking Mr Ashok and his bag not in a car, but the way my father would take a customer and his bag – in a rickshaw.

Seven hundred thousand rupees.
It was enough for a house. A motorbike. And a small shop. A new life.

My seven hundred thousand thousand rupees. (pp.280-281)

Balram asks Ashok to step down the car on the pretext that there is something wrong with the tyre. Ashok smells some foul play. After a good deal of pondering, Balram takes the decision to murder Ashok. He murders his master with a broken bottle. This is how Balram has killed Mr Ashok:

‘There is a problem, sir. You should have got a replacement a long time ago.’

‘All right, Balram.’ He touched the tyre. ‘But I really think we—’

I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains. It’s a good, strong bottle, Johnnie Walker Black – well worth its resale value.

The stunned body fell into the mud. A hissing sound came out of its lips, like wind escaping from a tyre.

I fell to the ground – my hand was trembling, the bottle slipped out, and I had to pick it up with my left hand. The thing with the hissing lips got up onto its hands and knees; it bagan crawling around in a circle, as if looking for someone who was meant to protect it. (pp.284-285)

Halwai does not want to live like others enduring the agonies silently. He wants to come out of the rooster coop and lead the life of an aristocrat. He is neither a born criminal nor has the support of criminals. Circumstances led him to kill Ashok. Violence is not a solution to come out of the poverty. Education is one of the ways of bringing people out of the darkness. Balram wanted to script his destiny. Rather than feeling remorseful for the crime he commits, he takes pride in the fact that he slaughtered his master and started his own enterprise. He has his own reasons to justify his crime of murdering his master Ashok. The novel ends with Balram’s plan of starting a new business in real estate and his declaration that even if he is ever caught by the police, he will never say that he made a mistake by killing his master. The fear of being caught
by the police does not arise at all as Balram is well aware of the loop holes in the existing law and order situation in India. After a successful operation, Balram went to Bangalore and started his business. The letters addressed to Wen Jiabao, the Premier of China record all the events of his life in a playful manner. The White Tiger is a novel which is a furious and brutally effective counterblast to ‘India is shining’ slogan and exposes its rotting heart. The protagonist is the voice of India’s silent underclass who resides in slums, railway platforms, bus-stands, and servants’ quarters and in every city in India. Aravind Adiga comments on it:

The White Tiger tries to give literary voice to a man from our gigantic underclass, which is over 400 million strong according recent estimates. . . . The portrait of Balram Halwai may challenge the deeply held, if not always openly stated, assumptions that many in the middle class hold about the poor: that they are stupid, easily manipulated, excessively religious, and bound by caste and family. It is an attack on a rotten political system that is stopping half of this country from achieving its potential. 4

References


