

## Bringing 'India of Darkness' into Light: A Socio-political Study of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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### Abstract

This study has investigated how Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize winner debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) has protested against the popular image of a shiny India. This inquiry is important because it has identified how the politicians have deceived the people of India by creating a false sense of development and advancement. The focus of this study is to demonstrate Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a socio-political critic of modern India. It has contributed in interpreting the life and culture of the people both in rural and urban India through analyzing some of the most powerful metaphors of the text. The paper has identified a number of ways how the rich has been exploiting the poor over centuries and how the basic needs of the poor have been ignored by the politicians in power. It is hoped from the current study that the writers, journalists, columnist and literary critics will raise the issues of the socio-politically suppressed people to bring justice to them.

**Keywords:** Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, India, caste system, exploitation, postcolonialism, darkness

### 1. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) contests the image of an emergent and shining India and makes the world rethink about their perception. Since most of the representations of India "in films and books coming out of India" carry the stories of the economic, political and technological boom, the lives of the underclass are "invisible" (DiMartino, 2014). Against this backdrop of representations, Aravind Adiga (2008) took a bold step in narrating the stories of the unprivileged people who live in "an India of Darkness" (p. 10). The central preoccupation of the novel is to diagnose the Indian society which has "burning problems like illiteracy, unemployment, pollution, poverty, caste discrimination, servitude, economic disparity and corruption" to further (re-)orient themselves towards the grass root people and to integrate the vast majority of the poor as they have been marginalized so far in the overall spectrum of India's development (Winmayil, 2012, p. 6). The fruit of India's freedom has been consumed by the tiny minority and the other "99.9 percent" (Adiga, 2008, p. 103) of the population has been relentlessly exploited.

### 2. Socio-Political Conditions of Rural India

The story of *The White Tiger* was the life and struggle of Balram Halwi, an underdog, in his pursuit for economic, social and cultural emancipation. It was a difficult struggle as he had been "confined behind bars of class, caste, economic disparity, illiteracy, zamindar system and poverty" (Kallappa, 2012, p. 232). In an interview with Lee Thomas, Aravind Adiga expressed his anxiety that if the government does not recognize the rights of the underprivileged and their aspirations to succeed, and if it does not provide opportunities to "these poor people to rise...this can only lead to trouble" (Thomas, 2009). Balram referred to his village as 'darkness', full of "misery, destitution and illiteracy" in his email to the Chinese Premier who was going to visit India to discover her from inside (Mendes, 2010, p. 277). He wished to inform the Premier that people in the 'darkness' find themselves constantly in struggle "against the affluent middle-class elites and politicians" for their day to day survival (Sheoran, 2013, p. 172). Projecting "a double vision of both rural and urban Indian life" (Suneetha, 2012, p. 174), Balram attempted to uncover the everyday struggle of the working class people living "under crushing poverty" (Narasiman & Chawdhry, 2013, p. 2). Being poor and burdened with family debt, in spite of his thirst for learning, the education was "snatched away" from him (Multani, 2012, p. 1041). After realizing that there was no prospect of his survival from the family debt, he migrated to Dhanbad, a local town, to work at a tea-shop. He soon got frustrated when he could not see himself escaping the poverty. Ambitious in the core of his heart,

Balram was not going to accept his fate “in poverty and low caste” and started looking for a change of profession (Sindhu, 2013, p. 332). He soon switched his job from a tea-shop boy to a house driver, and, then, accompanied his master Mr. Ashok to work in Delhi.

### 3. Socio-Political Conditions of Urban India

The scenario of the socio-political class conflict between the rich and the poor was there in the cities too. Balram understood how the car worked as a shell for the rich who did not even wish to be aware of the plight of the poor (Korte, 2010/2011, p. 299). Balram depicted the urban slums of Delhi in minute detail to show the pathetic living conditions of the wretched people. He demonstrated how the recent economic and technological development in the country had not made any difference in the life of the poor rather increased the exploitation of the immigrant workers. (Shagufta & Qasmi, 2013, p. 1; Cutie et al., 2011, p. 12). In Delhi he saw, from a close quarter, the hypocrisies of his employers and realized that serving them honestly and sincerely was not in the best interest of his career. After the event where his employer made him sign a legal paper accepting the entire blame on himself for the car accident which took place when Pinky madam, the American wife of Mr. Ashok, was driving, Balram knew he would be exploited and discriminated again and again because of his weak financial strength (Ramteke, 2013, p. 48). He decided to look for a breakthrough in his career to go beyond a life of servitude and establish himself as a successful entrepreneur.

Mr. Ashok, being educated, was sympathetic towards Balram. However, both of them got ethically degenerated in Delhi under the incessant pressure of the depraved social and political forces. In spite of their noble intentions, it was the corrupt socio-political machinery that had perverted people like Balram and Ashok (Sebastian, 2009, p. 244). Although getting degenerated morally, Balram had not given up his struggle to become an independent, free person. Two things that were impeding his struggle for emancipation were the lack of education and caste system (Waller, 2012, p. 8). Making things worse for Balram in Delhi, other drivers around him made fun of him when he attempted to explore something new and adventurous, as for instance, practising yoga. Desperate to end his servitude, he killed his master Mr. Ashok and ran away with his cash. He headed for Bangalore to start a new entrepreneurial life with the robbed money. Life and society in Bangalore was no different from that of Delhi for the poor. He had to bribe police in order to create an opportunity for his company for a ‘start-up’ in a certain company. The novelist gave a delicate hint of how corruption degenerates the morality of the people and makes them do their shrewd business fight and play dirty games in order to make money (Sarkar, 2012, p. 2). In Bangalore, Balram became a successful businessman because he had gone through the bitter experiences of life. He was in midst of ‘the rooster coop’ of the downtrodden people and saw how “the illiteracy, unemployment, Zamindari practice, social taboos, rigid caste discrimination, caste and culture conflict, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, economic disparity, superstitions, corrupt education system and health services, shrewd entrepreneurs, flood, mall culture etc contribute to the sufferings of underclass” (Singh, 2009, p. 104). Being informed about the whole social system from inside, Balram started exploiting all the loopholes of the society to become a successful businessman. When the novel closes, the readers see him taking an upper caste name ‘Ashok Sharma’ to become a member of the elite class. Unable to change the century old caste tradition and endemic corruption, applying shrewd business policies, doing malpractices, and adopting an upper caste name are not only the deeds of “Balram but it can be the story of many underclass boys” (Bartwal, 2014, p. 24).

### 4. The Evils of Caste System

Balram, who represented ‘darkness’ in Indian society, became ‘invisible’ again after achieving success in business to thrive further in the caste-based society by taking an upper caste name. It signifies there was no room for the so-called lower class people in the socio-political scenario of the emerging India. He knew that his “future depended” on his caste (Adiga, 2008, p. 37). It was his destiny. He became successfully ‘invisible’ from two types of ‘darkness’: he succeeded in hiding his so-called lower-caste status and his crime that he committed in Delhi. Aravind Adiga’s use of the metaphor ‘darkness’ was equivocal. It highlighted not only the pitiable life of the downtrodden class of the society as it might be inferred from the statement: “India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness” but also connoted the dirty and corrupt aspects of the rich (Adiga, 2008, p. 10).

### 5. ‘Darkness’ as a Metaphor

Along with the explicit presentations of the sufferings of the poor both in the rural and urban India in a Dickensian style, Aravind Adiga endeavored to portray the nasty hypocrisies of the upper class society. So, just a journey from poverty towards richness was not a journey from ‘darkness’ into ‘light’. The narrator used the metaphor ‘dark’ several times to depict the seamy side of the rich people, for instance, Mr. Mukesh, the dishonest son of a landlord, was described “a small dark man” (Adiga, 2008, p. 37) and a delicate hint of

ignorance and insensitivity was given when Balram noted that “the judges are judging in Darkness” (Adiga, 2008, p. 57). Against the metaphor of the Rooster Coop, which demonstrated how the miserably people of darkness lived, there was the metaphor of “dark egg” connoting the rotten and vulnerable life of the rich: “With their tinted (dark colored) windows up, the cars of the rich go like dark eggs down the roads of Delhi” (Adiga, 2008, p. 77). In the novel, ‘darkness’ was used as a metaphor particularly for corruption. This is a dramatic echo of Charles Dickens’s use of fog as a metaphor for corruption in his famous novel *Bleak House*, “Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city...at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery” (Dickens, 1853, Ch-1). When the two brothers were going to bribe a minister, the narrator depicted the journey: “I was taking my particular dark egg right into the heart of the city” (Adiga, 2008, p. 77). When they were returning after bribing, it was noted: “It was getting dark when the two brothers came out of the building... Mr. Ashok was dark and sullen when he got in” (Adiga, 2008, p. 78). Adiga had attempted to enlighten us that the ‘darker’ aspect of Indian society was not necessarily lying in the “India of Darkness”, it was also very much there in the heart of lightness, in the elite societies of cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Bangalore. There people were doing corruption worth hundreds of thousands of rupees and still remained invisible in the midst of all the lights. Balram gave an example from his own life: “There—I’m revealing the secret to a successful escape. The police searched for me in darkness: but I hid myself in light” (Adiga, 2008, p. 68).

#### 6. ‘The Chandelier’ as a Metaphor

The metaphor used against ‘darkness’, as a binary opposition, was ‘the chandelier’. There may be a positive resemblance between “Lord Buddha sat under a tree and found his enlightenment and started Buddhism” (Adiga, 2008, p. 12) and Balram’s convictions: “Now let me look up to my chandelier for inspiration” (175), “and let me sit down on the floor, and watch the fan chop up the light of the chandelier” (Adiga, 2008, p. 116) and “I love my start-up—this chandelier, and this silver laptop, and...” (Adiga, 2008, p. 192). Since most of the government institutions were rotten with corruption and malpractices, for instance, ill-equipped schools were creating only “half-baked” (Adiga, 2008, p. 8) people and the governing systems were rooted in “the jungle law” (Adiga, 2008, p. 38), the only salvation left open for Balram, at the moment, to bring change in his life and societies lies in the thirst for the light of chandelier. It was the thirst for inspiration, knowledge and wisdom generated from one’s incessant meditations and self-reflections.

#### 7. ‘The Black Fort’ as a Metaphor

“The Black Fort” carries the most symbolic satire in Adiga’s portrayal of the political scenario of India. Although it is the symbol of the political power of the country, it has never belonged to the masses as the people could not dare to enter the black fort. The fort itself has nothing to do with the population, it “stands on the crest of a hill overlooking the village” (Adiga, 2008, p. 14). Aravind Adiga lamented that although the rulers of India have been changing but the attitudes of the rulers have not been changed so far. So the people of India have not enjoyed the real taste of freedom, “(...In 1947 the British left, but only a moron would think that we became free then.) Now the foreigners have long abandoned the Black Fort, and a tribe of monkeys occupy it” (Adiga, 2008, p. 14). The ethics and aesthetics, the attitudes and motivations of the politicians in serving the country had been described in the novel through the animal imagery. Adiga demonstrated that the culture of the country’s politics had been so morally depraved and personally frightening that no honest, decent and civilized person with a real patriotic, sacrificial and humanistic attitude wished to explore there (in the Black Fort) “except for a goatherd taking his flock to graze there” (Adiga, 2008, p. 14). The image of the monkeys as running “wild along the walls, shrieking and attacking each other” (Adiga, 2008, p. 25), is particularly relevant if it is interpreted with the perspectives generated from the text itself: “...the day the British left—the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law” (Adiga, 2008, p. 38).

Balram understood very well how and why his father’s profession of making sweets had been robbed of from his family tradition and why there was almost no chance of his survival as a human in this ‘jungle’ if he had followed the traditional morality of obedience. He started getting more and more cynical and frustrated as he was getting informed about how the country was being run by the selfish elites. He himself narrated, “the sorrowful tale of how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness” (Adiga, 2008, p. 116). He depicted how his master Mr. Ashok could not survive in the whirlpool of Delhi’s corruption and reluctantly depraved himself. Balram argued that his being unscrupulous was the natural outcome of the social caste barriers and the political corruptions in the elite people like Mr. Ashok.

Balram had always been ambitious, determined and enterprising. He wanted to explore life and the world beyond

the barriers of caste and creed. He saw his salvation in crossing his own mental horizons. He was very much fond of Iqbal's poetry. Appreciating Iqbal, he quoted, "*They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world*" (Adiga, 2008, p. 25). Since his very childhood, Balram had been very much explorative and passionate about his search for new life and identity. He envisaged his success lies in overpowering the physical and mental barriers to reach at the top of the Black Fort. He dreamed, envisioned and made repeated attempts to ascend the hill till he achieved success. Even now he cherished how he had climbed up the fort and saw the world beyond, "It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth" (Adiga, 2008, p. 26).

## 8. Conclusion

Finally Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* was not only about addressing the 'dark' living conditions of the miserable poor, but also demonstrating how the rich had been exploiting the country for their own selfish end. The novel had played a major role in furthering the awareness of the people about the 'darker' aspects of both the poor and the rich demonstrating their deep frustrations. Both Ashok and Balram, the master and the servant, started drinking and going to prostitutes to escape from the awareness of the 'darkness' of life. The novel agitates the minds of the readers to interrogate the quality of the life and the society, especially of the poor and introspect on what must be done to address the 'darkness' for a greater progress and prosperity of the society. Finding little hope to grow out of the rigid caste based society and depraved political systems, the novel seems to suggest that the social and economic salvation for these poor masses lies in providing quality education to them. That the novel ends with the protagonist Balram's strong conviction in the bright future of the poor and his "starting a school...for the poor children in Bangalore" (Adiga, 2008, p. 192) demonstrates the novel's optimism.

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