

## Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* : A Saga of Extreme Suffering, Humiliation and Revenge

SANDEEP KUMAR

**Abstract.** Adiga has won great laurels winning the prestigious Man Booker Prize, 2008 for his debut novel, *The White Tiger*. The book is crafted in the epistolary form, as a series of letters written over the period of seven nights. Through these letters, the protagonist, Balram Halwai narrated the whole story of his life - how he became a 'self-taught' entrepreneur in Bangalore from a small, village boy working in a tea shop in Laxmangarh, his native place under Gaya district in Bihar, which is described as Darkness in the novel, and where his family like other villagers is subjected to exploitation and suppression by the village landlords. Due to extreme poverty, the boy has to drop his study though he was intelligent. The school inspector metaphorically called him 'the White Tiger', the rarest animal in the jungle. His visionary mind takes him to work as a driver to Mr. Ashok, the westernised son of a village landlord in Gurgaon. Living in the metro city, he is totally exposed to the corrupt world where he hopelessly watches his master consuming expensive wine, enjoying with other girls, carrying cash to bribe corrupt officials, politicians and ministers. Apart from driving job, Balram has to do many domestic works also. Moreover, he is often humiliated for his pronunciation, clothes and other habits. He develops some strange personality- shrewd, aggressive and violent. He adopts a new code of conduct which allows him to cheat them who are themselves cheats. Under this new morality, he murders his master and has no sign of guilt on his face, "I'll never say I made a mistake that night when I slit my master's throat." As a socio-politically conscious artist, Adiga makes a severe attack on the existing social, political and economic system of the country weaving a moving tale of sufferings, humiliation and revenge of the protagonist.

**Keywords :** Suffering; humiliation; revenge; social injustice; corruption, immorality; men with big bellies; men with small bellies.

*The White Tiger* is the debut novel and masterpiece of Aravind Adiga. The book, winning the author the prestigious Man Booker Prize, 2008, has drawn the attention of a large number of readers across the globe. Like *The White Tiger*, his other books - *Between the Assassinations* and *Last Man in Tower* also expose the current situation of the country such as corruption, greed, inhumanity, insensitivity, immorality, poverty and social injustice.

The novel is a series of letters written over the period of seven nights. Through these letters, Balram narrated the whole story of his life, from a small poor boy living in Darkness to a 'self-taught' entrepreneur in Light. Here Darkness is the symbol for 'a place where the poor live without basic facilities and with numerous

compromises' and Light is the symbol of 'a place where the rich live with all essential facilities, luxuries, comforts and abundance.' The novel highlights immoral ways of the rich, elite class and corruptions in police department, politics, press, judiciary and several other departments of government. He also exposes the brutal reality of Indian economic system that results in widening gap between the rich and the poor as it allows a small minority to prosper at the cost of the silent majority. He also warns the impending danger due to the collision between these two classes. *The White Tiger* encapsulates a pathetic story of Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel. Balram is born in Laxmangarh, a fictional village under Gaya district in Bihar. He lives in a big, joint family with grandmother, several aunts, uncles and nephews.

Balram was a very intelligent, sincere and hard-working student in childhood, but his extreme poverty forced him to leave his study and work in a tea shop. His father even being a rickshaw puller wants him to study further and live some better life. The poor man has a dream for his son. He said, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine- at least one- should live like a man." (*The White Tiger*, 30) But Balram's grandmother does not allow him to continue his study as she wants him to support the family. Balram's talent becomes more conspicuous when he answers all the questions asked by the school inspector. The visiting officer was highly impressed with his knowledge and confidence and remarked, "You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots." (35)

When the boy has to give up his study, it must be a tormenting situation for him. His dreams of getting good education and leading a respectable life get totally shattered. His life seems to be worthless for him in this dark and wide world. He has also seen the untimely, miserable death of his father. As a rickshaw puller, his father has to work very hard to support his large family even without caring his own health. Due to lack of proper food and excessive work, the man like many other rickshaw pullers has turned very lean and thin, and caught a very fatal disease of which he did not get cured and finally met a tragic death, "When Kishan put some food into father's mouth, he spat it out with blood. His lean black body began to convulse, spewing blood this way and that." (50)

Balram has to struggle a lot even for getting a small job outside his village. Thousands of villagers would sit near the tea shop in the village and wait for the truck to move into in order to find some construction, digging job or some other menial jobs in the city. Like other villagers Balram also has to fight with his destiny. When a truck came, a Sikh truck driver with a big, blue turban came out with a wooden stick in his hand and swung it to drive back the crowd and instructed to take off their shirts and show their nipples if they really want a job. Balram's experience was also very bitter, "He looked at my chest; he squeezed the nipples – slapped my butt- glared into my eyes- and then poked the stick against my thigh, "Too thin! Fuck off!" (55)

Balram requested the driver earnestly to give him a chance as anyhow he wanted to come out of his perennial poverty that was inherited as legacy. He also tried to convince him to work with his utmost potential, damn sincerity and sheer hard work, "Give me a chance, sir – my body is small but there's a lot of fight in it- I'll dig for you, I'll haul cement for you, I'll -" (55) But no words of his exercised any effect on the callous man and became extremely angry instead and hit him very hard with his stick. The boy fell to the ground hopeless and helpless, "He swung his stick; it hit me on the left ear. I fell down." (55) Soon the boy sat on the ground, rubbed his ear and watched the truck leave in a big cloud of dust. He burst into tears. The priceless words of the school inspector flashed in his mind, "White Tiger! There you are!" (55)

Time goes on and destiny makes the protagonist to work as a driver to the Stork, one of the village landlords in Dhanbad. While working at his house, he has to work all the 'menial jobs' apart from driving. He has to compromise much in his work and suffer a lot. Addressing to the Chinese Premier in his letter, Balram reveals the status of a driver in India:

Now, I say they took me on as their 'driver'. I don't exactly know how you organize your servants in India – or, at least, in the Darkness – the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants.

What I mean is that anytime I was not driving the car, I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a long broom. Or chase a cow out of the compound. (68)

In this cruel world, very few people understand one's emotions and feelings. Working in Gurgaon as a driver to Mr. Ashok also, Balram leads a hellish life. His master lives in the luxurious, expensive flat of a much expensive, elite apartment whereas he lives in a small dark, dingy room near the servants' dormitory:

"The second night, I did not sleep in the dormitory – I went to the room. I swept the floor, tied the mosquito net to four nails on the wall, and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, I understood why the mosquito net had been left there. Noises woke me up. The wall was covered with cockroaches, which had come to feed on the minerals or the limestone in the plaster; their chewing made a continuous noise, and their antennae trembled from every spot on the wall. Some of the cockroaches landed on top of the net; from inside, I could see their dark bodies against its white weave." (131)

Thus, we find that a poor man lives with a hollow existence, not in Darkness but also in Light. Balram's sufferings that started from his village did not mitigate in the metro city. The exploitative force is still operating with great force. The 'men with big bellies' are always ready to eat the 'men with small bellies' whose perpetual destiny is to be eaten up. No doubt, the novel depicts the endless sufferings of the protagonist.

*The White Tiger* also bears the touching tale of utter humiliation meted out to the protagonist at the hands of his master and his family members. Once Mukesh lost a rupee coin, he humiliates Balram very badly. He tapped his pockets and found that a rupee-coin is missing. He doubts that Balram has stolen it. He scolds him very badly and soon orders him very callously to look for it, "Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car." (139) The poor driver feels extremely shocked thinking that his family often bribes lacs of rupees every year to the corrupt ministers and government officials to run his coal business illegally and this time this man is screwing him for a single rupee. He feels extremely humiliated but has no choice as it is the order of his master's brother and so, even if unwillingly starts looking for it but he remains unable to find it out and finally he gives his own money convincing him that he finds out the missing coin. Balram, addressing to the Chinese Premier says:

I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee. ...

Where that rupee coin went remains a mystery to me this day, Mr. Premier. Finally, I took a rupee coin out of my shirt pocket, dropped it on the floor of the car, picked it up, and gave it to the Mongoose.

'Here it is, sir. Forgive me for taking so long to find it!' (139)

The protagonist is also humiliated by Pinky Madam, his master's wife several times, "You are so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, and look at your clothes! There is red paan all over your teeth; and there are red spots on your shirt. It's disgusting! Get out! Clean up the mess you have made in the kitchen and get out." (146) There are such several instances of such humiliation. He is also scolded by the Nepali king very badly when he handles two pomerians in chains, "Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!" (78) Such derogatory remarks hurt Balram's feelings very badly and germinates a seed of taking revenge against his master and also compels him to strive hard to come out of ill morass of his abysmal poverty.

Balram's suffering was at the climax when he was made a sacrificial goat. When his master's wife, Pinky Madam in an inebriated condition, runs over a

pavement dwelling child who dies on the very spot, the poor driver is trapped to confess the crime and sign in an affidavit in which he has to take the full responsibility for the accident.

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

I, Balram Halwai, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement of my own free will and intention:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects, on the night of January 23<sup>rd</sup> this year. That I then panicked and refused to fulfil my obligations to the injured party or parties by taking them to the nearest hospital emergency ward. That there were no other occupants of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.

Signature or thumb print:

(Balram Halwai)

Statement made in the presence of the following witness:

Kusum Halwai, of Laxmangarh village, Gaya  
District Chamandas Verma, Advocate, Delhi High  
Court (167-168)

Like Balram many other drivers often take responsibility for the accident and save their masters and their family members. Such drivers are as loyal as dogs. Of course, they are perfect servants. Balram divulges:

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse. (169)

The humiliating behaviour of his master and his family members, and the superficial existence of his torn life were the soul causes of his sufferings in the metro city. But, when he is made a sacrificial goat, his anger mounts up and decides to do something big and daring, may be very risky. And finally he murders his master:

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 Blackwell worth its resale value.

The stunned body fell into the mud. A hissing sound came out of its lips, like wind escaping from a tire. (284)

After murdering, Balram takes away his money, a red bag full with seven hundred thousand rupees to lead a luxurious life of the rich, privileged class. He fulfils his dream by becoming a 'self-taught' entrepreneur in Bangalore. He has no regret or any feeling of guilt for his disdainful act rather feels proud and have a sense of bravery and liberation, "I'll never say I made a mistake that night when I slit my master's throat... I've made it! I have broken out of the coup!"(320)

Balram's heinous act raises several questions before our intellectuals to brood over his inner consciousness. His offence demands a detailed psychoanalytic study of his personality and extends an enough scope for researchers and analysts. But here exploring some ground reasons behind his most atrocious plans would be more desirable. There may be several reasons but the prominent ones are a few. Firstly, the protagonist's poor economic condition, the perpetual state in Darkness. It is his poverty that compels him to drop his study and work in a tea-shop in his village. It is due to his poverty that he has to lose his loving father. Here poverty works as a driving force to the crime. Secondly, the acute corruption prevailed everywhere in the country. As a driver, working with his master in Gurgaon and Delhi, he is totally exposed to several kinds of corruptions and immoral ways of people, especially of the rich class. He hopelessly watches his master consuming foreign, expensive wine, enjoying with girls and models from different countries, carrying cash to corrupt ministers and other politicians and so on. Living in Metro, he develops a new code of conduct which allows him to cheat them who are themselves big cheats. He feels no hesitation or guilt to cheat his employer- siphon his petrol, pick up a paying customer and take his car to a corrupt mechanic who bills him for the work that is not necessary. He proudly says:

The strangest thing was that each time I looked at the cash I had made by cheating him, instead of guilt, what did I feel?

Rage.

The more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me. (230-231)

Thirdly, Balram's humiliation at the hands of his master and his family members. Actually, the protagonist had some hope of Light in his life, when he became a driver to Mr. Ashok in Gurgaon, but soon he got disillusioned. Apart from his driving job, he has to do all the small, domestic works in his master's house. Despite it, he is very often humiliated for no reason. Such sheer humiliation accelerates his rapacity to take revenge and boost his social mobility through economic progress. Thus, the protagonist's poverty, sufferings, exposition to the corrupt world, his master's taunting remarks, humiliating behaviour and ironic laughter makes him extremely furious and violent to rebel against the torturing situations as well as his master. His criminal offence can be understood as reactionary, a counter attack from the deprived, and the best possible response from the marginalized class in the given situation. M. Molly Joseph rightly remarks:

The novel encapsulates the resilience of the marginalized. Balram pushes his way up in life through tactful resistance and perseverance. He outlives the harrowing experience of suffering and oppression that is the average lot of his kith and kin, struggles hard to become a driver, and ultimately emerges into a 'self-taught', flourishing entrepreneur by slitting the throat of his master. (77)

But, as a lawful citizen no one would fully agree to the aggressive and violent approach of Balram. A person of the marginalized class should not follow his path blindly as everybody is not a 'White Tiger' like him. On the other hand, his path is highly risky and full of danger. And hence, he cannot be ideal for a person belonging to the underprivileged class. Adiga himself warns the reader about the protagonist's anger. In an interview with Nick Di Martino, the author critically remarks:

Balram's anger is not an anger that the reader should participate entirely- it can be seen at times like the rage you might feel if you were in Balram's place- but at other times you should feel troubled by it certainly.(Interview)

Thus, Adiga as a socio-politically conscious literary artist, remarkably highlights the acute corruption, immorality, social injustice and poverty of the country but his approach is not to hurt anybody's feelings or lower the country's status but to expose the stark realities of current India where only two castes exist - "Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up."(64) He also hints the impending danger of the fast widening gap between these two castes or classes. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a starving man can take risk upto any level to survive himself. He will not hesitate to murder someone even for a loaf of bread. No doubt, the novel is an eye-opener for

SANDEEP KUMAR

a conscious citizen of the country and a serious warning to our government through the shocking tale of the protagonist's sufferings, humiliation and revenge.

**Sandeep Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English  
Kamla Rai College, Gopalganj, J.P. University, Chhapra

**Works Cited**

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi : Harper Collins, 2008.

Di Martino, Nick. "Interview with Aravind Adiga". *The Shelf Life*. University Book Store. October 6, 2008.

Joseph, M. Molly. "The Great Indian Rooster Coop – a Postcolonial Entry into Adiga's *The White Tiger*". *Littcrit* 35. 1-2.67-68(Jun.-Dec.2009)