

Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* : A Journey from 'Darkness' to 'Light'?

Manju Dhariwal

Talking of inequality in Indian social structure, Arvind Adiga, the author of the award winning novel *The White Tiger* in one of his interviews says, 'India is a society of profound inequality and inequality is not just a moral vice - it also leads to instability'(Caesar 2008). The novel which shocks and entertains the reader in equal measure, presents social issues which are relevant not only for raising questions of morality in Adiga's microcosm of a nation, but also in a much wider realm of existence. In this paper I have examined some of these issues brought to light by the author.

The narrative opens with the narrator, Balram Halwai, the self styled 'White Tiger' of the title unfolding the 'dark story' of his life in India in a letter addressed to the Chinese president. India, as the narrator describes 'is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness' (Adiga, *The White Tiger* 14). He connotes rural India with 'Darkness' and urban India with 'Light.' Born in a small village in a poor family, he is pushed by forces beyond his control into a life of servitude which he detests from the core of his heart. His quest to find light eventually takes him to Delhi. This city of light, ironically, at the end engulfs him in its quagmire of corruption, deceit and crime. A simple, honest, hardworking man is transformed into a monster who is 'straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time.'(9).

Balram Halwai, the protagonist, is a person who symbolizes a rural common man, a man with limited means but with lofty dreams. He belongs to Laxmangarh, a stereotypical Indian village. The family of the narrator is peculiar in the sense that the Granny holds the reins to destinies of all members of the family. Ironically this rein of a female head of the family does not improve the fate of other female members. Balram's mother suffers his granny's scorn throughout her life. Even after her death, Kusum, the granny, announces callously, 'She was a crazy one and she's dead, and thank goodness' (29). Animosity and indifference are predominantly visible in gendered hierarchy of the family.

The narrator views village life as a microcosm of India possessing all the ills that the country has. Education in the village has been a mockery. The government school, a 'paradise within a paradise' (32) is a place where there is no teaching as the teacher is an embodiment of lethargy, idleness and corrupt practices. To 'retrieve his missing wages' (33) from the government, he is misappropriating the funds allocated for children's lunch and uniforms. Neglected portraits of Gandhi and Buddha hanging on the walls of the school, probably represent people's apathy and indifference to the teachings of these leaders. The infrastructure in the village is pathetic. The water taps are broken and electricity poles are defunct. 'Lohia Universal Free Hospital' is a mock-symbol of the hospitals in Indian villages where people eventually die for want of medical treatment. The doctors take advantage of their association with the so called

'socialists' and both benefit from the gaping holes of corruption in the system. Anyone in power abuses it for his or her own benefit.

Life in rural India is shown as a critique of modern India and its class divisions. The phenomenon of stratification of society has attracted the attention of a large number of scholars. The main concern has been with the 'inequality' that stratification causes and with 'equality' that is desirable. In this context, the noted Indian Sociologist, Andre Beteille, has remarked, 'Our age, it is said, is the age of equality. This does not mean that the inequalities deposited by the past have ceased to exist or that no new inequalities can be expected to arise' (Beteille 168). Slavery and servitude for the masters run deep in the blood of the class inflicted society. Adiga presents a gloomy picture of this society by comparing children working in the tea shops to 'human spiders' and 'crushed humans in crushed uniforms,' (Adiga 51). A picture of malnourished children with 'oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India' (20) provides a glimpse of Adiga's caustic humour. Adiga further compares Indian social system with a zoo where everyone has their assigned place in the social hierarchy. The society has now unfortunately got transformed into just two classes, he rues: 'Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat- or get eaten up' (64). Here, Adiga is referring to the traditional hierarchical society of India where 'inequalities in a social context are not given to us by nature, but culturally constructed by particular human beings under particular historical conditions' (Beteille 8).

Balram Halwai sets out for his journey from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad. Dhanbad, symbolizing a modern city of India, is a 'half- baked city built for half- baked men' (Adiga 53). It plays the transition of the Halwai from a tea-stall worker to a car driver for Storks, the village landlords. This, metaphorically speaking, is the first major milestone in his journey from darkness to light. In the Stork household he gets illuminated on politics, coal and China; the family fortunes, and Black Dog Whisky; the family habit. It is here that the nexus between politics, bureaucracy and business leading to corruption is revealed to him. With a hint of sarcasm and resignation, he addresses the Chinese premier, 'we may not have sewage, drinking water, and Olympic gold medals, but we do have democracy' (96). Democracy as an institution is further mocked when seen in the light of the relationship between the great socialist and the landlord. The socialist earns his so called 'reputation' depending upon the amount of embezzled public money he has amassed and the number of criminal court cases against him. Elections, the back bone of a democracy are rigged as is announced unremorsefully, 'someone else has voted for me twelve times' (100). Anyone asserting to vote is 'thrashed' and 'kicked' until he gets 'stamped back into the earth' (102).

Ironically it was around this time that Balram, who was constantly in search of identity, gets illuminated on the relationship between the master and slave. Though utterly desperate to free himself from this bondage, he is forever subservient to the needs of his masters. Furthermore, religion and nature also teaches reverence and servility. Having observed this mentality of servitude among Indian masses, he mocks '... the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga' (195). When he is

asked to accompany his master Ashok to the city of Light, Delhi, servitude finally gets ingrained in his psyche.

Degeneration of the soul sets in as soon as Balram comes to Delhi, the city of light and opportunities. The process is gradual as the soul keeps on getting inflicted emotionally and morally, on a regular basis. It starts with humiliation when he is asked by the mongoose, Ashok's elder brother, to search for a one rupee coin in the car. 'That's how you corrupt servants. It starts with one rupee' (139), the mongoose quips flippantly. Humiliation is followed by pity, indifference, subjectivity and ultimately charges of murder. This results in the naïve Halwai from Laxmangarh actually becoming a murderer of his master, Ashok. This transformation of a simple soul into a killer suggests the intensity with which the soul rebels against the atrocities inflicted on it and leading inadvertently to transgression of all sane boundaries of rational existence. Here it won't be inappropriate to compare Adiga's philosophy of life in *The White Tiger* with the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky. In *Crime and Punishment*, the protagonist, conditioned by society, commits a murder. But his Conscience, 'which is a product of some mythological conditioning in his mind,' (Mcneil 1998) could not distort his reason. Unlike Adiga's hero, who lives life afterwards without any guilt, in *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov's Christian values of love, altruism, and sympathy emerge victorious. Under the influence of 'the meek and illiterate Sonya - an embodiment of wisdom of the meta-rational kind' (Mcneil *ibid*), Raskolnikov starts a new life, a new story, 'the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life' (Dostoevsky 542). This spiritual journey was denied to Balram, either because of his mental conditioning or because of the absence of a mentor who would hold his hand and lead him to the right path.

Bondage of body and soul is suffered not only by Balram, but also by hundreds and thousands who have migrated to the city leaving their families back home. People who were 'close to their families in 'Darkness' (poverty) have come to cities in search of 'light' (material comfort), but they are bullied, overworked and exploited. It is amply evident 'by the animal like way they live under the huge bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them'(120). One cannot help but notice the tragedy of their existence. Having migrated to a land where instead of 'being led from darkness to light' (136) as shown symbolically by the statue of Gandhi, their life seems to be engulfed further into a dark abyss from which there is no escape.

In Adiga's narrative, from president's house to call centers to malls, exploitation of poor is rampant. While important tasks are being carried out in big buildings by big people; life of little men on the road keeps getting insignificant. Having lost their homes and families, these multitudes of poor are in perpetual agony and desperate need to find meaning in their lives. Ironically, just like Balram, they had come to Delhi to find some light, but their lives were further shrouded in misery. The condition of this working class in cities reminds one of the industrial workers or 'Hands' in Dickens *Hard Times*. In *Hard Times*, the 'Hands' wake up every day to a mechanical life of 'Clattering of clogs upon the pavement;

a rapid ringing of bells; and all the melancholy mad elephants, polished and oiled up for the day's monotony' (Dickens 54). Similarly, Adiga's poor are confronted with the harsh reality of day to day life in the city. Dickensian Smoker-serpents and crashing and smashing of construction work going in the city add to their grief and rob them of the precious years of life. At the end, what they get is hunger, humiliation, poverty and pollution.

Machines with huge 'metal jaws alternately gorging and disgorging immense quantities of mud' (Adiga 158) and puffing out poisonous smoke, is metaphorically speaking, representative of their own lives. The metal jaws are the jaws of life which dislocate and churn lives of millions of people coming from villages to cities to make a living. The writer-activist Arundhati Roy in one of her essays calls this bottom-most segment of society as 'industrial units'. She writes, 'These non-citizens are employed in what economists rather stuffily call the 'informal sector', the fragile but vibrant parallel economy that both shocks and delights the imagination. They work as hawkers, rickshaw pullers, garbage recyclers, car-battery rechargers, street tailors...' (Roy 212). The plight of these migrant workers has also been taken up by Kaveri Nambisan in her book *the story that must not be told*. Inhabitants of Sitara, the slum built on a swamp, these migrants have created a microcosm of their own with all kinds of employments to sustain life in a city. She writes, 'They streamed in from villages...With poles, gunny, palm leaves and scrap, they built their homes. If there was more work to be had, they stayed. If there wasn't, they went away' (Nambisan 221).

Added to the despair faced by poverty, the poor of the city are also harassed by the rich. Mobile phones are given to the drivers to take orders from their masters at odd hours. They dance to the tunes of whims and fancies of not only their masters but their mistresses as well. At one instance, Balram is to act as a Maharaja to amuse Ashok's wife and at another he has to stand near the portrait of cuddles and puddles, the dogs, with folded hands to take orders from the masters. The loss of identity as an individual is complete when he is asked to own up an accident that caused the death of a child for which Pinky, Ashok's wife is responsible. Showing his resentment towards the treatment meted to the poor by rich, Balram says- 'A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent- as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way- to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse' (Adiga 176). After such a pessimistic portrayal of the Indian society, Adiga's earlier optimism about the 'glorious twenty first century' (6) being one of 'yellow and brown man' (7) seems paradoxical.

In *The White Tiger*, there is the voice of 'Balram Halwai' which the author uses to focus the fact that good lives led by the rich evoke emotions of dissatisfaction and revenge in the poor. The images of Goddess Kali and the fluffy Ogre with an orange tongue symbolically portray hatred, anger, and a feeling of revenge in the poor. Balram, a representative of this class, eventually kills his master and gets 'corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness' (197).

The novel can be read in several ways. On the one hand it portrays the life and aspirations of poor in the village, on the other it reveals the hardships and challenges faced by the dislocated poor working in the city. It also draws attention to the insignificance of a common man's life. *The White Tiger* promises to take the reader from darkness to light in the same way that Gandhi and Dostoevsky did through their lives and work. In 1909, when *Hind Swaraj* was written on a ship from Britain to South Africa during ten days of cruise, there was such darkness in India due to slavery under alien oppressive rule that the darkness depicted in *The White Tiger* appears as insignificant. But *Hind Swaraj* is not a book of despair. It neither mocks nor trivializes the darkness but shows plans for action using moral forces like satyagraha and non-violence. It is this hope and faith in goodness of mankind that attracts people towards *Hind Swaraj*. It also brings to mind the works of Munshi Premchand, the great Hindi prose stylist who depicted Indian social reality faithfully. But the question here is, does Adiga succeed in his attempt to present a real picture of India? Balram's acute observations and a sardonic attempt at painting a portrait of India fail somewhere. They appear more like the picture drawn in Miss Mayo's 'Mother India' of yore albeit of the present day India. One recalls that there was a widespread criticism of the lack of human values in the description of Miss Mayo. There is much to ponder about this insensitive depiction of reality in the present context.

When Balram says, "I'm tomorrow", it's unclear what kind of tomorrow he represents. His success is built on a murder followed by adapting a life style of the affluent class. He doesn't even hesitate to abandon his family in his desire to achieve success. Is Adiga suggesting such a dismal future for the younger generation of India? Adiga would be more successful if he had instead shown darkness of the human mind irrespective of geographical and class boundaries and suggested some action plan to regenerate hope and faith in human spirit and goodness of mankind.

Works Cited

- Adiga, Arvind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009. Print.
- Beleille, Andre. *The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983. Print.
- Caesar, Ed. "News Review Interview: Arvind Adiga" *The Times*, 19 Oct. 2008. Web. 19 May 2011.
- Dickens, Charles. *Hard Times*. 1854. London :Wordsworth Classics, 1995. Print.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. New York: Bantam Classic, 2003. Print.
- Mcneil R. "Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment". 19 Nov 1998. Web. 10 May 2011.
- Nambisan, Kavery. *The Story that Must Not be Told*. New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2010. Print.
- Roy, Arundhati. "The ladies have feelings, so..." in *Texts and Their World I*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.