

# ***The White Tiger: A Western Cosmopolitan Model***

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## **Abstract**

The contemporary Indian literature entered a decisive, cosmopolitan and globally popular phase with the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981. The following decades have witnessed the growth of a literature that has been outward-looking, confident, and increasingly widely read. It is arguable that in that time the Indian literary diaspora has had a greater impact on English Literature than writing from any other nation. (Ashcroft, "Beyond" 6) This paper examines the representation of the marginalized people vis a vis the growing influence of capitalism and modernization on their lives in Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger* (2008). Further it also focuses on Adiga's diasporic identity and how that has shaped author's experience and portrayal of his native land.

**Keywords:** Capitalism; Diaspora; Modernization; Otherness; Stereotypes.

## **Introduction**

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won 2008 Booker Prize, the same year it was published. This makes Adiga the fourth India-born author after Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai to win the prize. These authors enriched literature with their literary innovations and unique perspectives on India and the world; Salman Rushdie's writing is marked by innovative use of magical realism, intricate storytelling, and exploration of post-colonial themes. His works like *Midnight's Children* (1981), *Shame* (1988), *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) had a profound influence on post-colonial literature and is known for his ability to capture the complexities of identity and cultural heritage.

Arundhati Roy's most celebrated work, *The God of Small Things* (1997) explores themes like love, caste, and the social complexities of India. Her

work reflects deep social and political engagement rendered through poetic prose. Similarly Kiran Desai's writing is characterized by insightful exploration of the immigrant experience and the consequences of globalization. Therefore like his predecessors Adiga falls in line and delves into themes of corruption, exploitation, social inequality and social mobility. *The White Tiger* is acclaimed for its powerful social critique, intriguing characters, and unique narrative style.

The story revolves around the transformation of a small poor village boy from Laxmangarh into a successful rich business man in Bangalore. The novel is structured in the epistolary form and is divided into seven letters that are addressed to a Chinese premier, Mr. Wen Jiabao, who is expected to visit India. Each letter highlights a crucial phase in Balram's life. The first letter titled, 'The Darkness' traces Balram's childhood in the village and the struggles of his poverty stricken family. Nevertheless he is able to become a driver for a wealthy household in Delhi, the Stork family through his smartness and ambitious nature. The second letter titled the 'Rooster Coop' is a metaphor to foreground the state of oppression and powerlessness of poor people in India's caste based society. Balram narrates the lavish and corrupt lifestyle of the Stork family and his experience of being treated as a servant by them. The third and fourth letter reveals the events that led him to murder his master employer, his escape and subsequent entrepreneurial venture of taxi business that he sets up with the stolen money and his changed identity. The fifth letter titled, 'The Mongoose and the Maruti,' reflects Balram's business growth coupled with challenges of corruption and criminality within Indian society and his interactions with corrupt political and business elite.

The sixth letter, titled 'The Tragedy of Balram,' emphasises Balram's business success and the power it brings him and at the same time the choices and moral compromises he has made. The last letter to the Chinese Premier is a confession of his actions and an invitation to change the oppressive system in India. He considers himself as a "white tiger," a rare figure who has broken free from the constraints of the society. The novel ends with Balram's message to the premier expressing his ambition and hope for change. Balram's journey from a non-descript village to becoming a successful entrepreneur is intriguing, as he navigates through complexities of life and a morally ambiguous world. His story serves as a critique of social and economic inequality in contemporary India. The novel offers a thought-provoking exploration of the harsh realities of Indian society, class and caste system, corruption, and the pursuit of success in a rapidly changing world.

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## Analysis

The novel deals with economic inequality, social injustice, poverty and corruption. The first person narrative from the perspective of a self-reflective and impenitent antihero is distinctive and darkly humorous, marking a departure from conventional protagonist. The narrative voice employs the techniques of stream of consciousness and flashback method and both allow the author enough room for making comments and switching between the scenes. The novel opens with an announcement on the "The All India Radio" that "Mr. Jiabao is on a mission, he wants to know the truth about Bangalore" and "wants to meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of their success" (1). Balram, takes on the responsibility to present the true picture of India to the foreign guest along with the story of his own path to success as an entrepreneur. He begins to unfold his own story of how he established himself in Bangalore- the IT hub of India and makes shocking revelations to the foreign guest. The first paragraph of the very first letter strikes the reader as unusual and shocking, not because Balram expresses his admiration for the guest's country but because he bashes his own motherland- India. He writes,

Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, 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 outsourcing companies that virtually run America now. (Adiga 4)

Balram emphasizes the brutal division of economic inequality on which Indian society stands. Balram reveals that he too is the victim of this inequality when he dwells upon the details of his childhood and education. His father was poor rickshaw puller and is called 'Munna' as none of his parents had time to name him properly. *The White Tiger*, the title refers to "the rarest of animals-the creature that comes along once in a generation" (35), he earns this title as an applause from his teacher for being deemed the smartest boy in his village, otherwise a community deep in the 'Darkness'. He attends the local school but unfortunately the death of his father and the grinding poverty of the family forces Balram to leave his school unfinished. Thus Balram, gives an introduction of his self and likes of his,

Me, and thousands of 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: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half-hour before falling asleep- 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 bugger one another, and make more half -formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (Adiga 10-11)

He moves to Dhanbad, the city of coal mines, works in a tea shop, breaks coals and wipes tables. He shamelessly claims: "I did my job with near total dishonesty, lack of dedication and insincerity - and so the tea shop was a profoundly enriching experience" (51). The burning desire of becoming rich leads Balram to learn driving and very quickly he succeeds in winning a job of a driver. Balram is hired as a chauffeur by a wealthy landowner of his village who now live in the city. Balram tactfully wins the trust of the landowner. Balram is assigned to drive for the landowner's son Mr. Ashok, who had recently returned to India from New York. Thus Balram arrives in Delhi, working as a driver with his master.

Balram lists, what he considers his entrepreneurial skills that fetch him extra money while working as a driver for Ashok; to steal and sell the petrol of the car and costly whisky of his master; to get commission from the car repair mechanic and to rent out the master's car. The only dream that he cherishes is to become rich like his master. He thus takes advantage of his master's disturbed personal life, plans the scheme of murdering him and stealing his money. He justifies his action of brutal murder and the breach of trust by relating it with the inability to come out of the coop that cages the poor in India under servitude and subordination at the hands of their rich class:

The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as

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worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They know the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. (Adiga 173-174)

Adiga justifies Balam's treacherous act of murder and all the vile acts of his protagonist under the guise of some kind of freedom and salvation, only to be able to break from the conventional trope of servitude that runs in Indian civilization. But at the same time fails to analyse the value system of care, trust and loyalty that makes the relationship divine as any other human relationship in Indian society. He again evaluates this through his mocking attitude:

Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. 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, he will throw it back at you with a curse. (175-176)

The master –servant relationship has been well exploited by Adiga to tear the Indian social fabric asunder. Balam not only sustains himself but shines as an entrepreneur. What Adiga seems to suggest is that in this country of crime and revenge, there is no place for punishment and repentance. He creates an India that has lost all its moral values in the name of power and money. About Delhi, one of the metropolitan cities of India, he says:

Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the darkness too- you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, 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. (119-120)

Adiga has intertwined two stories through the central protagonist, who is also the narrator of the story. Adiga traces the path of India's progress in the present century through Balam Halwai's journey. At the surface

level, Adiga seems to give voice to the Indian subaltern masses but ironically fails to fulfil the claim as his diasporic background and cosmopolitan vision echo the Western stereotypical discourse of India.

While describing India further, he explains to the foreign guest: "Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river" (14). Adiga does not spare the sacred river Ganga and describes it in following terms:

That black river I am talking of – which is river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it? Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. No! – Mr. Jiabo, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces. (15)

Balram shows the same sense of disrespect for the Ganga, which is considered the most sacred river of India "the black river" as he calls it for it brings, in his opinion, darkness to India and warns the guest against taking a dip in it (14).

Balram Halwai's growth graph from his dark village, Laxmangarh to opulent city, Bangalore' is a profane leap rather than a positive change. Through his underdog anti-hero's perspective, Adiga has portrayed India devoid of all grace, glory and moral grandeur. Balram has an irreverent attitude to religion and religious symbols that are so important in Indian life. He shows nothing but disrespect to the gods. He makes fun of the tradition of beginning a story with a prayer to the divine power by saying that he was obliged to begin with "kissing some god's arses" (8). He questions the existence of gods and is sarcastic about his religion:

The temple. Inside, you will find an image of a saffron-coloured creature, half man half monkey: this is Hanuman, everyone's favourite god in the Darkness. 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 have foisted on us, Mr. Jiabao. Understand now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India. (19)

Thus Adiga critiques the socio-political and religious fabric that make the Indian national identity.

Although Adiga tries to voice the pain and suffering of the downtrodden, poverty-stricken section of his society, the novel is bitter and satiric in tone. The novelist aimed to voice the misery of the subaltern but he is blind to the distressful working conditions of the marginalised people he tries to sympathise with. He seems to be ignorant about their humane side and fails to recognise it through and through. This is evident in how he portrays the labourer – worker class who are journeying back to their native villages and home towns:

A month after the rain, the men come back from Dhanbad , Delhi and Calcutta leaner, darker, angrier but money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the doors ,and as soon as the men walked in they pounced like wild cats on a flesh. They were fighting, walking and shrieking . My uncle would resist and keep some of the money but my father got peeled and skinned every time. I survived the city but I couldn't survive the women in my home. (2)

The inability to see the poor as capable of beauty or dignity first and foremost dehumanizes them and makes them victims to be targeted for intervention rather than agents themselves of emancipatory change.

## **Conclusion**

The novel as a genre has been traditionally critical rather than affirmative about society. R.K Narayan and Raja Rao however explored facets of India bypassing the critical stance . Mulk Raj Anand's novels are in the tradition of social criticism. Rushdie, Roy and Adiga's narratives target the Indian state –its corrupt ministers, politicians , judges and police . Roy's novel claims to be about history. Official Indian history is the backdrop for Rushdie, Roy ,and Desai's novels against which are played out human dramas that revise, remake and retell history. Desai and Rushdie style their narratives on actual historical events and political leaders . Roy uses Marxist Kerala with its caste system as a backdrop. But Adiga portrays a contemporary India still in the making. Balram's journey from his village to Delhi and then to Bangalore is also the story of India's natural resources (coal mines), Delhi's transformation into a megacity ,and the growth of Bangalore through the "IT sector". In other words, the document of a fast-changing India with a certain amount of class mobility and potential growth , but also an India of proverbial paradox where more the things

change, more they remain same. The dominating theme that surfaces in the novel is to highlight the bad side of India that is engulfed into a kind of darkness according to Adiga.

In the West the corruption, violation of human rights, and squalor in India become rich data, very reportable. In a sense, texts of the Indian Booker prize winners are "Reports" on India. There is sarcasm and irony. *The White Tiger* also comes up as a tourist account of India. Adiga's story remains the view of a professional observer. More than anything else the author too has employed the East-West binary opposition to portray Western culture at more appreciable and superior level than to which he himself belongs that is India:

Ashoka's avowal of friendship towards Balram is an act of honourable gesture. His belief on even those who are inferior in status and rank from him is really appreciating. It is his Americanism that has provided him a broad outlook which finds no distinction in caste and colour. The Minister's "assistant" on being asked if he did not have to work for the coming elections, tells Ashok: "Election, my friend can be managed in India. It's not like America." (Adiga 212)

Adiga fully copies and echoes his Western masters and has not even spared the most controversial and contemporary prejudiced view about the Muslim world today in his novel, "Mr. Premier: have you noticed that all four of the greatest poets in the world are Muslims? And yet all the Muslims you meet are illiterate or concerned head to toe in black burkas or looking for buildings to blow up? It's a puzzle isn't it? If you ever figured these people out, send me an e-mail" (40).

And again at the end of the novel Adiga aims at the minority class, this time with a more reserved and sheltered approach: 'I've come to respect Muslims, Sir, They are not the brightest lot, except for those four poet fellows, but they make good drivers, and they're honest people, by and large, although a few of them seem to get this urge to blow trains up every year" (102).

Despite its contemporaneity, Balram's story has been the by-line of popular Indian cinema for decades -poor village boy menaced by villainous feudal lords, move to big city, is exploited by rich and powerful there too, and finally learns to be tough, hits back and avenges all. The critique it offered has been a sanitized and domesticated one, the hero can do no evil.



He cleans the world. Adiga presents an exact opposite antidote. Balram triumphs not by cleaning the rotten system but by putting it to full use. Adiga's documentation of the new India, where right and wrong is an irrelevant question is reflected in popular Hindi cinema in the recent trends as films that do not use the staple formula of good against bad, showing instead the lives of the bad from a sympathetic angle.

T.N. Murari in his article "The Love to See us Poor" observes that:

Their international success reassures the world which views us through the grim prism of our poverty, that India has not changed – much. India Shining,' 'Incredible India,' 'India Inc,' unsettles the Western nations. They need the poor as long as they are at a safe distance, stuck in India. Our poverty gives them a sense of superiority and they feel threatened with whatever little success we have had. We still have the poor, the vast slum, farmer suicides, to reassure them that the India they know and hold at arm's length, is still with them. India still elicits the opposite extremes of emotion – love and hate. History has not been kind to us.

The India, Adiga narrates offers no hope, no solution but leaves everything in the mess. Such representation is antithetical to the view that India is in line of competitors of world super powers. Adiga reiterates and echoes the Eurocentric perspective about the East which he sets out to subvert. Through his novel, he serves the interests of his Western audience. However the huge economic divide which envelopes India into 'Darkness', according to Adiga, is not a peculiar feature of Indian nation alone, but the world over. There are examples from the Western world that refer to same crisis of unequal distribution of wealth. George Orwell stated: "All men are equal but some are more equal than others" (89). This writing is given recognition in the West where it is primarily published awarded and "made". The concern with unrest and injustice in Indian society, is indicative of a certain view of India that is of interest to the West. Finally the intentions behind such a piece of writing is made clear by Lisa Lau, who describes this kind of scathing representation of a nation as "Re-orientalism" (2), wherein the negative images and stereotypical representation is endorsed by the westernised Indian writers who are caught up between two realities and juggle between hybrid identities. Nevertheless the novel offers a scathing social commentary on the socio-economic disparities and corruption in India. It sheds light on the harsh realities faced by the underprivileged and marginalized sections of society and raises difficult questions that resonate with the world we live in today.

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