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## **Balram: From Servitude to Salvation in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***

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### **Abstract:**

Aravind Adiga's first novel, *The White Tiger* is such a work which depicts modern Man's complexities guided by the corrupted wills of ambitious civilized tyrants. In the sophisticated societies, people have been divided into classes of Rich and Poor, both at the extreme ends. Coveted desires for affluent life, coloured by the western influences have tormented modern Man to pursue crime and practice immoral life. The protagonist Balram Halwai too is a portrayal of vivid reflection of victimization caused due to this rotten contemporary modernity of urban civilization. His dilemma is to come out from this persistent status of servitude towards so called illusive salvation (freedom). He even murders his Master in order to live free, rich life of a 'Man' he dreamt of. The present research article is a modest delineation, a kind of introspection of Balram's inner journey from servitude to salvation, the two extremes.

**Keywords: Servitude, Conflict, Dilemma, Salvation, Affluence.**

### **Introduction:**

Aravind Adiga who was born in India in 1974, later went to Columbia and Oxford Universities for the study of English Literature. Initially, he worked as a journalist, first as a financial correspondent in New York since 2000 and then returning to India in 2003, worked as a correspondent for *TIME* magazine. He wrote copious articles on Politics, Business and Arts which appeared in national and international publications. *The White Tiger*, his debut novel published in 2008 won him the coveted Man Booker Prize for Fiction. It is in an Unsent Letter Form written to the Chinese Premier from Balram

Halwai, who left his village to work as a chauffeur in Delhi and made an active attempt to become free from servitude murdering his master.

### **Servitude and Salvation:**

The novel, *The white Tiger* depicts the existence of two countries in one: the India of Darkness, the rural inner continent, slavery, servitude, impoverishment, the *Rooster Coop* and The India of Light, the urban India, the Rich. India is a country teeming with millions living in utter poverty and the few rich at the top positions who mercilessly exploit them. Balram Halwai, the protagonist belongs to servitude and Darkness like many other poor people of India. Balram called it as a mechanism in which the Great Indian *Rooster Coop* traps the Indian impoverished under-class in a perpetual state of Servitude. It involves both deliberate methods used by the upper-class and the so called mentality imposed by the upper-class on self. His effort to come out from this state and how he breaks out what he calls the Great Indian *Rooster Coop* forms the crux, core part of the narrative. Balram, the White Tiger passes through the plight of a perpetual Servitude, Darkness to a stage of successful entrepreneur, the status of Freedom, Salvation and so called 'Tomorrow'.

### **Dilemma and Outcome:**

Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the story of a man who hangs between good and evil and is finally overcome by the devil. His 'Macbethian' ambition to live like a lord, and like a master turned him into a cold blooded murderer. *The White Tiger* is the saga of making an entrepreneur. The protagonist Balram Halwai, an inhabitant of the darkness always sees the dream of living like a 'Man'. This is the dream which his father saw for him. His father was a rickshaw puller who died of tuberculosis in a government hospital waiting for a doctor. His father always desired that that Balram should study well in the school and live a better life, the life of human being and not of insects as he himself ever lived. Balram was a sharp student but his family takes him out of school and puts him to work in a teashop of the village. Balram never likes the work of wiping tables and crushing coal. Once he hears that drivers earn a good salary of Rupees 1700 a month, he decides to become a driver. He learns to drive and fortunately the Stork, a rich village

landlord, appoints him as a driver for his America return son, Mr. Ashok. Balram comes to Delhi with his master. Here his ambition grows bigger. Earlier his dream was to earn a handsome salary and Khaki uniform but the day he sees his master's red bag filled with money, avarice enters his soul. He is never at peace since then and finally he plans to kill his master and to run away from there to live a free life like a 'Man'. The novel is replete with various socio-political themes of contemporary situation. It deals with age-old themes of suppression of the poor by the village landlords, differences between the rich and the poor, political corruption and the servant-master relationship. It also vividly portrays human nature, how various people behave in various circumstances.

Balram, once he starts earning sufficiently well, he starts ignoring his family and their needs. Earlier he was quite faithful and devoted to his master Mr. Ashok, but in greed of money and to fulfill his lustful desires, he starts cheating him. The worst ideas of deceit come to his mind when he sees the red bag, full of rupees. As he clicks the red bag open, "All at once, the entire stairwell filled up with dazzling light-the kind that only money can give out" (243). Balram, though he likes his master, appreciates him for his goodness, but ultimately kills him ruthlessly. A single glimpse of the insides of the bag makes him brutal and blood thirsty. Basically Balram is not an entirely black character. He is neither rotten nor saintly. He has certain merits and demerits. He is a grey character who has some flaws and often acts immorally.

As Balram is not a completely corrupted individual so he faces great mental conflict before committing the murder of his master, Mr. Ashok. For a long his mind is given to the thought of money that he sees in his master's bag. First he avoids looking at the red bag which was blinding for him. "I tried hard not to look at the red bag- it was torture for me..."(244). While driving the car, the red bag constantly lingers in his mind. He keeps on thinking about the right or wrong, fair and unfair. His mind says, "Go on, and just look at the red bag, Balram that's not stealing, is it? And even if you were to steal it, Balram, it wouldn't be stealing"(244). When he looks at the rearview mirror, various images and notions come to his minds. He is caught between the two ideas to steal or not to steal. Strange thought visit his mind:

"See Mr. Ashok is giving money to all these politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the Tax he has to pay. And who owns that Tax, in the end? Who but the ordinary people of this country-you! "(244).

As guilt enters his mind and soul, he sees all things and statements as pertaining to his plan. He feels as if the city has known his secret. Everything has become transparent, his evil notions, his plans, everything. He feels as if his heart is saying to him why to worry, why to ruminate so much over this. "You've already done it. In your heart you've already taken it "(245).It is ironic that Balram who remains in an undecided state of mind whether to steal the red bag or not, starts planning and working ahead.

### **Concept of Freedom:**

Freedom is one of Balram's cherished dreams! The theme of freedom/salvation has been handled in the novel in the light of materialism which is adverse in Indian social structure. So the term freedom has been discussed in various ways with different connotation, so far as the novel is concerned. In fact, this word has distinguished interpretations for distinguished people. Saints and the divine scholars say that getting rid of worldly objects and worldly relations is freedom. Human beings are preached to free their minds and souls from jealousy, falsehood, passion and from all evil things, existing in the world and they should devote themselves to the divine power and the divinity itself is the real freedom. For a prisoner coming out of the four walled cage is freedom. For a poor being releasing himself from the shackles of poverty is freedom. Everyone defines freedom in his own way. Balram too, has his own concepts about freedom. He is lover of freedom and he had this spark since childhood. He quotes a poem, the name of the poet (a Muslim poet, as he calls) he doesn't recall, has written about slaves: "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world, and he thinks: that's the truest thing anyone ever said" (40). He says to Mr. Jiabao: "Even as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world: I was destined not to stay a slave" (41). He admires Mr. Jiabao's country and people for they never let the British rule them:"Only three nations have never let themselves be ruled by foreigners: China, Afghanistan, and Abyssinia. These are the only three nations, I admire"(5). He regrets: "Free people don't know the value of freedom, that's the problem" (117).

### **Inner Conflict:**

Being the son of poor rickshaw-puller who was 'a man of honour and courage' as he calls his father, Balram had to be a servant by coincidence. In the beginning, he serves his master honestly and devotedly. He does all the households works, washes his master's Pomeranian dogs and conceals all secrets of his master. Quite often he is humiliated too. He feels that all poor servants are trapped in *rooster coop* and there is no escape because it is not guarded only from outside by the masters, but also by the fellows inside: "The Rooster coop was doing its work. There's a vicious trap in which the servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs" (194). So finally he decides the strategy of his freedom, but it was full of cruelty and wickedness.

All human being have a conscience and it always checks them from doing hideous and immoral deeds. Then it depends on individual choice, if one listens to it or ignores it. Secondly there is fear of being caught and being punished that prevents a human being from doing a wrong and illegal action. Balram's conscience also ceases him from committing crime. His father had taught him true courage and integrity. His father wanted to see him as an educated man and to earn his bread fairly and honestly...and live like a 'Man'. First it was the goodness of the blood he owned from his father that he meditates for a long before slaying and robbing his master, secondly he fears for his family that has to pay later for his sins. It makes him honest enough when he thinks to go further in his plan: "Think, Balram. Think of what the Buffalo did to his servant's family"(248). Tormented with such thoughts he loiters on the roads of Delhi. He decides to go to 'red-light district' to relax himself but there too he starts fighting with the people. Then with a heated and confused mind he walks away and goes to the big second book market of Darya Ganj. Here he learns two lines of an Urdu poem: "You were looking for the key for years/ but the door was always open!" (253). He finds the key to his problem in these lines. These lines then recurrently echo in his ears.

Just the next day after this incident, when his master comes to the car, Balram decides that he would materialize his implied plan, but then he changes his ideas when he sees his master busy with his mobile. He deems about his master's ignorance relating to

the conflict going on his mind..."to have a madman with thoughts of blood and theft in his head, sitting just ten inch in front of you, and not to know it. Not to have hint, even". (257) He calls it blindness that his master is talking to American, thousands of miles away but not having even..."the faintest idea what's happening to the man who's driving your car!"(257). Balram's mood gets rotten when Mr. Ashok gives him a hundred-rupee note for celebration for his marriage. His master's words, "we'll take care of your wedding expenses" echo in his mind.

Balram remains very inconclusive about what to do. Though he slaps the boy Dharam and ill-treats him, yet he thinks that the arrival of the boy has saved him from sinning. He muses: "I had come to the edge of the precipice. I had been ready to slay my master -this boy's arrival had saved me from murder (and a lifetime in prison)" (263). Once while sitting outside a teashop he sees the dirty black water passing, a voice inside him says: "But your heart has become even blacker than that, Munna". (265). Balram's mental agony somewhat touches Macbeth's conflict before he murders his lord Duncan. He shares some of his traits with Macbeth. The red bag causes spell on Balram as does the prediction of witches on Macbeth. The thought of murdering their lord upset their mental state. Balram's mind is also troubled with his imaginations of killing his master. Though he always loves him and admits that his master is better than nine in ten, yet he slays him. In greed Macbeth and Balram both kill their masters, though fortunately both had good masters and both loved their masters well. Macbeth, while planning to assassinate Duncan, thinks about his goodness, "... thus Duncan/ hath borne his faculties so meek ... that his virtues/ will plead like angels trumpet- tongued against/ The deep damnation of his taking off;" (I,vii).

Balram at many places admires his master: "I had always known that he was a Goodman: a cut above me" (210). He further says: "If you were back in Laxmangarh, we would have called you the Lamb"(142). Mr. Ashok always takes care that Balram should live comfortably; he even proposes to pay his hospital bill. Due to his master's goodness Balram tells the caretaker: "I love Mr. Ashok so much, you must let me serve him lunch!" (82). But his greed kills him, though he couldn't see him suffering. At many places Balram's goodness and humanity is displayed. He shows his deep concern and love for

his master. When Mr. Ashok's wife Pinky madam leaves him, he becomes miserable. At this, Balram gets very sad. He says: "It squeezed my heart to see him suffer like this- but where self-interest began, I could not tell: no servant can ever tell what the motives of his heart are" (187). Unfortunately evil succeeds both Macbeth and Balram and despite their admiration and love for their lords, both of them kill their masters callously. Both deceive their masters who trusted them deeply. Duncan had a lot of faith in Macbeth and his goodness; on the other hand Mr. Ashok always admires Balram for his devotion, honesty and goodness. His perennial thinking was that Balram is honest, good and trustworthy; he is not crooked and cunning like other city drivers. Thus his Master Ashok could never guess what he was doing behind his back.

The lines: "I was looking for the keys for years / but the door was always open" keep on instigating Balram towards the evil deed. He finds the meaning in this verse indicating towards his ambition, his aim. He feels the door of a better life was always open; it was he who could not identify his way. In the death of his master his life was hidden, a new life, a life lived by a 'Man'. Ultimately, his mind dragged him to plot the murder by selecting the weapon, a broken bottle of Johnnie Walker Black, with his claws of glass. The day when Balram has to act his plan, he first drives his master to the city where Mr. Ashok collects money from bank to bank and when the weight of the red bag was growing he feels its pressure increasing on his lower back, ... "as if I were taking Mr. Ashok and his red bag not in a car, but the way my father would take a customer and his bag-in a rickshaw"(281). He dreams of seven hundred thousand rupees. "It was enough for house. A motorbike. And a small shop. A new life" (281). As it was raining that day, the roads were deserted; Balram stops the car and bids Mr. Ashok to step out. His constant refrain at that time was, "Trust me, Sir, trust me". He imagines that his master's body is moving as far from him as it can. He thinks: "I'm losing him, I thought, and this forced me to do something I knew I would hate myself for, even years later" (283). When Mr. Ashok comes out and bends to see the wheel of the car Balram hits his skull with the bottle and Mr. Ashok's body falls into the mud. Balram grows cruel. First he thinks over the question of leaving his wounded body in the bushes, but due to the fear that he will recover and call the police, he decides to kill him. Turning to the body around, facing to himself he stamps his knee on its chest then opens the collar button, slits his master's

throat and finished his life-story. Now he feels like 'a free Man' (286) having escaped the clutches of the *rooster coop*.

Balam attains everything he has yearned for, freedom, money and power. He doesn't repent for what he did though he was sorry for Mr. Ashok. The character of Balam seems to assert and justify his evil deed. The story shows evil winning over good. Balam's statement: "I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be servant..." (321), raises many questions. Balam believes that he is 'a man of action and change, a self-taught entrepreneur'. A man who is projected as a good and talented person in the beginning of the story and who comments on corruption, dis-integrity, cruelty and on evil deeds of other people and laments for the lot of the poor ones, when he proclaims himself to be a man of action and change, it indicates towards a strong individual who would fight for his rights openly and proudly. A few words that Balam frequently speaks attract attention; freedoms, to live like a man, servitude, lightness and darkness. The way these terms have been interpreted by the protagonist, they show a sea change in the morality of the present age. Today's spirit is happily willing to sacrifice age-old morals for comforts and pleasure. They do not wall to fall into the debate of good and evil.

Balam firmly believes that he wants to be free; he could be free if he had left the job, but then he would have to suffer poverty again. He does not want merely freedom, but also money and easy money. He now wishes to become the Stork, the Buffalo and the Raven that he used to hate. He craves to live like a 'Man'. Is living like a man is to live in sins, immorality, and cutting the throat of other? He wants to escape servitude and humiliation but in this world everyone has to be a servant; in some or the other way; every lion is guarded by the other bigger one. Balam himself writes to Mr. Jiabao: "But pay attention, Mr. Premier! Fully formed fellows, after twelve years of school and three years of university, wear nice suits, join companies, take order from the other men for the rest of their lives" (11). Humiliation is also a part of human life. If Balam is insulted for he is a servant, then his master is also humiliated by politicians.

### **Conclusion:**

According to Balram, the world of poverty is the world of darkness and the world of richness is the world of light. But they who are living in light according to Balram and ever shopping in malls, they too lead a suffering existence. Their problems are not related to bread and butter but are of other types. After gaining worldly wealth Balrma's body may live in the light but his soul is in the darkness and will always remain there. Only eternal truth gives real freedom to the being. Sin and untruth always binds him, slaves him. A sinner's soul is always a troubled soul. One can never justify evils for black is black and white is white and will always remain so.

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