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Class Stratification in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

The White Tiger is the narration of a journey of the protagonist Balram from rags to riches amid fierce class war, exploitation, amorality and expanding globalization. Balram is crushed in a callously stratified society as a resident of dark India. He is unable to pursue his education because of unavoidable economic pressure. He is compelled to become a Halwai (sweet maker) and then a driver to a rich man's foreign qualified son who resides in a cosmopolitan city. This cosmopolitan life opens up utterly new and till now undiscovered horizons of life, riches, and success to him. He happens to observe, learn and experience completely new and startling incidents, people and places there which resultantly make him take the revenge of the whole proletariat on the bourgeoisie. Novel validates the veracity and relevance of the Marxist ideas exposing various divisions and fissures within Indian societal structure.

Introduction:

Class antagonism and social stratification have always been a part of the societies from the dawn of human history. Literature, being a mirror of the society, has often reflected this class warfare quite profoundly and abundantly. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is also a brutally realistic exposition of this class struggle betwixt two opposite strata of society between which gap is impassably wide and it is still widening. Their interests are in a sheer contrast with each other. Aravind Adiga's debut and Man Booker Prize Winning epistolary novel *The White Tiger* is a chronicle of the underbelly Balram. He dares to dream of joining the well heeled class by breaking the social, moral and religious shackles in which he has been enchained since his birth because he belonged to the lowest economic stratum of Indian society. It is only owing to his sheer luck, stubborn struggle and cold insensitivity towards others that he realizes his dream and starts his own business of taxis, by the name of "The White Tiger Drivers".

Balram belongs to the proletariat. His education, his aspirations and his quest for learning are succumbed because of the oppression and exploitation of the capitalist class. He spends the early years of his life in utter poverty and misery. He witnesses his family members struggling to make both ends meet; his father dies because of insufficient economic means to access good medical facilities to cure his tuberculosis. His mother also dies because of the helplessness that is results from poverty.

The White Tiger is the epithet given to the protagonist, Balram, by an education minister, who visited his school when Balram was a child. He calls him *The White Tiger* because he could be distinguished in the whole school because of his brilliance and thirst for knowledge and learning. *The White Tiger* means the rarest of the animals, the tiger that comes once in a generation of tigers.

Theoretical Framework:

According to Karl Marx, history itself is nothing more than the struggle between various classes in society. Marxism questions the centuries old beliefs and traditional ways of looking at societal structures. It challenges the inherently deep rooted stratification of the society into bourgeoisie and proletariat: the class that controls the means of production and the class that serves bourgeoisie in order to earn their bread and butter. They have only two options; either starve or work for bourgeoisie. People are engaged into relations of production though these divisions of wealth and means of production. These relations of production become incompatible with the existing social set up after a certain time period. People refuse to accept things as they are. They challenge the system and a revolution takes place. Resultantly new relations of production are established.

Marxism calls into question the social system and living conditions which is built solely for the maintenance of the status quo and to support the privileged position of bourgeoisie. Class stratification has been falsely considered a natural way of human life on earth that cannot be abolished. Class is a human construction arising from man's lust for the possession of power. Money, being one of the biggest sources of power, is used for the division of human beings and societies into various classes and the maintenance of these classes. This all is possible if the proletariat becomes conscious of the class divisions and quit their passive obedience to the system. They challenge the capitalists to either respect their existence or expect their resistance.

The working class should have class consciousness to abolish this callous classification convention. This will help the people to challenge the status quo. Class consciousness is the awareness of the truth of the social conditions. Proletariat should support a revolution as they have nothing to lose but their chains. This is the phenomenon that is portrayed in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga as Balram breaks the shackles of class through class consciousness. His education and awareness make him class conscious and rips the façade of the division of society. He awaits a revolution to turn the system on its head, to make the rich capitalists powerless.

Speak to me of civil war, I told Delhi.

I will, she said.

Speak to me of blood on streets, I said.

I will, she said.

And if there is blood on these streets - I asked the city - do you promise that he'll be the first to go - that man with the fat folds under his neck? (Adiga, p.221)

Class Stratification in *The White Tiger*:

Societies are not divided only into proletariat and bourgeoisie but there are numerous other sub divisions too. Every single aspect of a man's life is an expression of his class. Their language,

their food, their dress, their ways of living, sleeping and eating speak about their class. This is witnessed in the novel as people in India are stratified on the basis of the geographical places of the country in which they reside, the liquor that they drink, the schools where they study, their appearance, their castes. There are further sub-divisions the basis of the size of their bellies and their appetites.

Balam, the protagonist in *The White Tiger* points out that India itself is divided into two: India of Light and India of Darkness. India of light belongs to the rich of India who can create their desired life style, (obviously the air conditioned European ways of living) even in the dusty and scorching Indian plains because they possess the money that is the ultimate source of power whereas India of darkness is the India of the poor, a fertile, green land, full of rice and wheat fields, ponds filled with lotuses and water lilies but all this fertility enriches the India of light. Residents of the Dark India are blazed by the India of Light which shines only because of the lights stolen from the Dark India, its inhabitants and its rich resources. Poverty reigns supreme in India of darkness because its wealth fills the bank accounts of the ones living in The India of Light. It is the India of the darkness that the novel sympathizes with, presenting a desolate, gloomy and brutally realistic image of it. Dark India is rotten, corrupted and blackened to the core by those who are filthy rich. The rich want their dogs to be treated like human beings and the poor human beings live like dogs.

"India is two countries into one, India of Light and an India of Darkness. Ocean brings light to my county. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off but the river brings darkness to India." (Adiga, p.14)

Living conditions for the residents of the darkness are frightening and animal like. Educational facilities are sparse. School, where the protagonist Balam studies, is a nightmare. Big lizards crawl around in the school building, walls are broken and there is no furniture for the students. Electricity poles are there but they are defunct. Dark India has water taps but those are broken and get no supply of water. Adiga jeers at the way government plans for the provision of better facilities of life to the poor masses. Instead of providing them clean drinking water, government provides these thirsty populaces the mobile phones and cheap call rates. Children in dark India are like ghosts with over sized heads because of malnutrition.

“Electricity poles: defunct

Water tap: broken

Children: too lean and short for their age and with over sized heads from which vivid eyes shine like the guilty conscience of government of India.” (Adiga, p.20)

The biggest difference betwixt these two aforementioned Indias is that of choice. In India of light one at least has the choice to choose for himself but in dark India one even cannot choose for himself. One cannot decide that what one wants to do with one's life. The poor are not given the chance and they do not dare to snatch the chance from their exploiters. Balam stand out because he had the guts to steal his chance to go beyond the boundaries set for him as a member of dark, unprivileged India.

Many residents of Dark India move to the cities in the hope of a better life. They can be seen

scattered in the city, with expectant eyes though their expectations hardly get fulfilled. They fail because they do not have the guts to say good bye to their slave like ways and get rid of their inner demons which bar them from showing any defiance to the rich who restrict their upward way to progress and better opportunities. People who come from darkness can be recognized very easily.

“You can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal like way they live under the huge bridges and over passes, making fires, and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them.” (Adiga, p.120)

Most of the things about the residents of Dark India are unalterable. Their diseases never get cured, because of their inaccessibility to the medical facilities. They have no sense of individuality; they sleep together at nights with legs crossed around each other. They have animal like life style; they fight and quarrel daily without any definite reason, pull each other’s hair, slap each other and after few hours become friends again. They do not own even their own bodies; their bodies are owned by their rich masters. They do not have any control on their lives; their lives are controlled by the rich bourgeoisie who rules over them and makes all the decisions for them. They are born with their destinies. These destinies are generally their castes.

“... halwai...That’s my caste - my destiny. Everyone in the darkness who hears that name knows all about me at once.” (Adiga, p.63)

There are many divisions, sub-divisions and fissures in Indian society that Adiga highlights in *The White Tiger*. People are divided on the basis of the liquor they drink. There are English liquor men and Indian liquor men. English liquor is for the rich of India and Indian liquor is for the poor of India. The people who buy English liquor are privileged and carry an air of importance about them; liquor sellers provide their orders quicker than the orders of Indian liquor men. On the other hand, the buyers of Indian liquor are underprivileged; they get their turn late in the row, they have to wait longer than others to get their liquor order from the sellers as they belong to the servant class, the poor.

“...In this country, we have two kinds of men: Indian liquor men and English liquor men. ‘Indian’ liquor is for village boys like me – toddy, arrack, country hooch. ‘English’ liquor, naturally, is for the rich. Rum, whisky, beer, gin – anything the English left behind.” (Adiga, p.73)

There are categories of the servants too; servant no 1 and servant no 2. Adiga narrates Balram’s experience of buying English liquor for his rich masters and the deep sense of depravity that arises in the servants for their inability to drink Black Dog as it belonged to their masters, it was a luxury only for the rich. He tells us

“He wanted to hold the bottle; he wanted to hold the full virgin bottle of first class whisky in his hand. He wanted to imagine that he was buying it for himself.” (Adiga, p.75)

Novel suggests that residents of India must be reckoned by the size of their bellies as the size of one’s belly is matters. The rich have big bellies and the poor have small bellies. The men with

big bellies are

"the most ferocious, the hungriest and have eaten everyone else up and grown big bellies. That was all that counted now, the size of your belly it did not matter whether you are a woman, or a Muslim, or an untouchable anyone with a belly could rise up". (Adiga, p.64)

Others are the people with small bellies who serve to satiate the hunger of the men with big bellies. People are also stratified on the basis of their appetites. The rich has a lust to eat and digest everything in the country. People who eat and the people who are eaten up. Balram is among the ones being eaten up when he was in village, in his father's house. His father spent his life like an animal, lean, thin, weak, miserable, ripped to the bones, with thousands scars on his body. He wanted a respectable life for his sons, a life that he could not earn for himself. He repents

"all my life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I wanted that at least one son of mine - at least one - live like a man." (Adiga, p.30)

Bodies of the human beings, belonging to two different societal strata, are a complete opposite to each other. A poor man's whole life history is engraved in his body. All the whip marks, curves around neck, scars and cuts on the body of a poor man yell out loud the ravages life has run on him. Rich man's body is soft, smooth and white because of the air conditioned living atmosphere he could buy for himself with the help of his riches to stay safe from the scorching heat of the Indian plains and the cruel sun.

"The story of a poor man is written on his body in sharp pen." (Adiga, p.27)

Whereas

"A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow: white, soft and blank." (Adiga, p.26)

Balram realizes all these brutal realities; he observes everything around with a keen eye. Though unable to continue his academic education, he resumes with the worldly education. He listens to the people on tea stalls, the roads, the shops and any place and person from where and whom he could learn something. He did not miss even a single chance to grab the opportunity in his whole life. That is what helped him to become a The White Tiger. He leaves everything that he finds slave like or unlike the rich. He observes his master, Ashok, shopping, notices his choice and next time buys those colors and those prints that Ashok bought for himself.

"Blue, chequered polyester shirt, orange polyester trousers...those are the kind of clothes sir which would appeal to a servant's eye." (Adiga, p.22)

Balram swears to never wear those colors and cloths in his life again. Instead he wears the things that his master likes to wear in order to look like him, which is only a sign of his aspiration to become a master in the coming years.

Balram becomes class conscious. He journeys from rags to riches because of his education.

Education serves as a tool of emancipation for him. He learns from the world, from the people and from his experience as well as from others' experience. When he moves to the cosmopolitan, he is suddenly aware that this city is also divided, it is the capital of two different Indias: India of the Light and India of Darkness. Cities in Darkness are the "half-baked cities built for half-baked men" (Adiga, p.53)

"Gurgaon, Mr. Ashok lived, is the bright modern end of the city and this place, Old Delhi, is the other end. Full of things that the modern world has forgotten all about – rickshaws, old stone buildings, and Muslims." (Adiga, p.251)

Here Balram observes the reasons of widening and impassable gap between rich and the poor. Ashok bribes the politicians by giving them the hard earned money of his village people. His wife jeers at Balram for being unable to pronounce Pizza correctly. Balram is forced even to take the blame of murder committed by Ashok's wife, Pinky. She happens to crush a child under her car while she drunk. It infuriates Balram all the more; this anger rises day by day, gradually taking the form of a storm inside him. Here he realizes the cruelty of system and façade of justice is torn apart as he notices the falseness of the high abstract ideals of truth veracity. He describes the response of police towards the crimes committed on the members of different classes.

"A man on bicycle getting killed – the police even do not have to register a case. A man on motor bike getting killed – they would have to register that. A man in a car getting killed – they would have thrown me in the jail." (Adiga, p.309)

He tries to take his revenge on Ashok in every possible way. He steals petrol from his car, he wants more money from him, and he copies his life style. The more the master gets rich, the more it enrages Balram. Ashok goes to a golden haired call girl who looks like Kim Basinger. Balram pays all of his pay to sleep with a golden haired girl to get the feeling of being a master. When girl comes, it is revealed that her hair are dyed, they are not real. He wonders at the way things happen in life

"That is when it hit me, in the way it never had before – how the rich always get the best things in life, and all that we get is their leftovers." (Adiga, p.233)

Pinky leaves Ashok and goes back to America. When master is broken, servant has to play the wife as well. Balram takes care of all the needs of Ashok, takes him to dinner. He orders many dishes instead of his knowledge of his inability to eat them all. He marks the distinction by saying that food is "enough to feed a rich man or a whole family" (Adiga, p.238). Because of rising globalization, Balram watches countless buildings growing around, including shopping malls, call centers and clubs. All of these marvelous glass buildings are constructed by the residents of the Darkness but they are never allowed to enter there. Balram manages to go inside one shopping mall once, by wearing a T-shirt like that of Ashok. He regrets the fact that the poor builders are not allowed to peep inside the glass and stone structures that they build with their own hands.

"These people were building homes for the rich but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets and partitioned into lanes by sewage line." (Adiga, p.260)

Working class itself does not support the proletariat cause, they never help each other rather the servants are always abusing, scorning and jeering at other servants. It is only the strong that the respect out of fear. Balram looks at a book stall and sees few books but the illiterate salesperson rebukes him harshly. Balram responds him in an even harsher way which sets his tone right. First he spoke in a “servant to servant” tone but afterwards it changes into a “man to man” tone. Adiga names it “Rooster Coop” as he opines that the capitalist elite have managed to guard the coop from inside. No servant lets another servant try to escape.

“Servants need to abuse other servants. It’s been bred into us; the way Alsatian dogs are bred to attack strangers, we attack anyone who is familiar.” (Adiga, p.130)

Rich, ruling elite grab their wealth only because of proletariat working class but they are reluctant to spend even a single penny on their servants. Balram happens to lose one coin and Ashok’s elder brother goes mad about this loss, exposing the stinginess of the filthy exploiters who do not allow the poor to have even a small part of the money that belongs to them. Balram succeeds in breaking his shackles by the end of the novel and becomes a part of the master’s class, using the money that he stole from Ashok. He wonders the way 99 percent of the population is enslaved by the 1 percent ruling rich, how they could keep the 99 percent unaware of the conspiracies for the maintenance of the rooster coop, how they could accept their inferior status unquestioningly and unhesitatingly?

“How could two such contrasting specimens be produced by the same soil, sunlight and water?” (Adiga, p.80)

By the end, when he himself is a part of the same system that he loathed, he avoids doing all those things to his workers that he has not liked when he was a servant. He does not repeat the cycle. He learns the tactics of moving forward in a capitalist society but he rarely uses them against the working class.

“It’s amazing. The moment you show cash, everyone knows your language.” (Adiga, p.300)

His journey from rags to riches has not been very spic and span but probably he had no other option to break out of the coop, to get free from the shackles of poverty and class.

Conclusion:

The only way out to rid people of this callous class division and its tools is to disabuse them of the false consciousness perpetuated to them by bourgeoisie and instill in them class consciousness. Balram is an impressive example of this. The justification for the murder of Ashok that Balram commits is hard to find but we cannot help appreciating his courage and his unbelievable bravery to realize his dream. He is the one awoke when everyone else of his class is in a deep slumber. “How Big Can You Think” (Adiga, p.318) determines your destiny according to him. He rejects the so called government planning and management

“If I were making a country, I’d get the sewage pipes first. Then the democracy, then I’d go about giving them pamphlets and statues of Gandhi”. (Adiga, p.96)

Balram succeeds in achieving his dream through education. He is well aware of all the worldly knowledge as he has been a keen and sensitive observer.

“I have always been a big believer in education – especially my own.” (Adiga, p.52)

He plans to establish a school for the children of the poor to give them lessons not of the abstract ideals of gods, loyalty, truth, obedience, and Gandhi but of the harsh realities of life and these tigers from the school of white tigers will be unleashed on Bangalore. They will change the destiny of India. He wants to instill the liberated spirit in all the future generations as he says

“Haven’t I succeeded in the struggle that every man here should be making – the struggle not to take the lashes that your father took, not to end up in a mound of indistinguishable bodies that will rot in the black mud of river Ganga?” (Adiga, p.318)

Aravind Adiga has given the readers an inspiration in the character of Balram. He is a protagonist well alive to the new hopes and demands of coming times. As a whole, novel is an exposition of the shining India rhetoric. Adiga has almost perfectly juxtaposed the societal stratification stemming out of the economic stratification. It tells the story of almost every person in sub-continent if seen through the Marxist lens, giving us a silver lining that status quo would not last long and people would realize the injustices being done to them and that will be the end of the thuggery, hypocrisy and exploitation in their lives as Adiga closes the novel with a positive note in the words of Balram

“I’ll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, for an hour, for a minute, what it means not to be servant.” (Adiga, p.321)

In a nutshell, novel is an apt exposition of the exploitation of the working class at the hands of capitalists. It highlights the class stratification in Indian society and in the sub-continent, presenting Balram as the working class hero. It also anticipates the future of unjust class division which will end in the overthrow of capitalists.

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