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Balram's Quest for Freedom in Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

The White Tiger is the debut novel by Indian author Aravind Adiga. It is first published in 2008 and won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. It is a novel about a compelling, angry and darkly humorous man's journey from Indian village life to entrepreneurial success. It is about the journey of Balram Halwai, the protagonist, a village boy who happens to be a sweet make to a successful businessman. He never turned back. He was annoyed with the society. He thinks that the poor man in our county is half-baked and he compared them with the chickens who are kept in the Rooster Coop. How Balram came out of this Rooster Coop and how the quest for freedom made him to face the nastiest situation that involves murder, cheating, bribery and stealing is the major theme of the book. He is referred to as "The White Tiger" which symbolizes power, freedom and individuality. He is the one who got out of the "darkness" (low caste) and found his way into the "Light". So this paper analyses how Balram Halwai's thirst for freedom, his anger, protest, indulgence in criminal acts, prostitution, drinking, chasing, grabbing all the opportunities, means fair or foul endorse deep-rooted frustration and its reaction against the "haves" made him a criminal but a successful extrenepreneur.

The White Tiger is a book about a man's quest for freedom. Balram the protagonist in this novel worked his way out of his low caste and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. To complete the mission to become an entrepreneur he does everything and achieves it by killing his master. By doing this, he shows the picture of modern India and educate the masses about the criminals who are born due to inequality, corruption and injustice in the society.

Keywords: White Tiger, rooster coop, entrepreneurial, darkness, light, inequality, corruption, injustice.

The White Tiger is the debut novel by Indian author Aravind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. Adiga's novel was described as a compelling, angry and darkly humorous novel about a man's journey from Indian village life to entrepreneurial success.

As Michael Portillo, Chairman of the judges of Man Booker Prize said.

In many ways it was the perfect novel. The judges found the decision difficult because the shortlist contained such strong candidates. In the end, *The White Tiger* prevailed because the judges felt that it shocked and entertained in equal measure. The novel undertakes the extraordinarily difficult task of gaining and

holding the reader's sympathy for a thoroughgoing villain. The book gains from dealing with pressing social issues and significant global developments with astonishing humour. Portillo went on to explain that the novel had won overall because of its originality. He said that *The White Tiger* presented a different aspect of India and was a novel with enormous literary merit (Web. 15 Oct 2008).

The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from the protagonist, Balram Halwai, a village boy to the Chinese Premier His excellency Wen Jiabao during seven nights. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding the history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow" (Adiga 319).

Adiga says in an interview,

At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination. (Jeffries 2008).

The main theme of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is that the rich people, politicians, policemen and the upper society people are enjoying their lives with the help of the poor people who are still under crushing poverty. Introducing a major literary talent, *The White Tiger* offers a story of flashing wit, blistering suspense and questionable morality told by the most volatile, captivating and utterly inimitable narrator that this millennium has yet seen. Balram Halwai is a complicated man, servant, philosopher, entrepreneur, murderer over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of preposterous chandler, Balram tells us the terrible transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life, having nothing but his own wits to help him along. Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver of his village's wealthiest man.

The white tiger of the novel is Balram Halwai, a poor Indian villager whose great ambition leads him to the zenith of Indian business culture, the world of the Bangalore entrepreneur. On the occasion of the president of China's impending trip to Bangalore, Balram writes a letter to him describing his transformation and his experience as driver and servant to a wealthy Indian family, which he thinks exemplifies the contradictions and complications of Indian society. Balram moves to New Delhi with Ashok and his wife Ms Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New Delhi, Balram is exposed to the extensive corruption of India's society, including the government. In New Delhi, the separation between poor and wealthy becomes even more evident by the juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers. One night Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family eventually decides to frame Balram for the hit and run case. The police tells them that no one reported a child missing so that luckily no further

inquiry is done. Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government itself. Having being humiliated so many times, during a trip back to his village Balram insults his grandmother and tells the reader and the Chinese Premier that in the next eight months he intends to kill his boss. Balram then decides that the only way that he will be able to escape India's 'Rooster Coop' will be by killing and robbing Ashok. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deals with corrupt mechanics and refill and resell Johnnie Walker black label bottles (all but one). He also finds a way out of the coop that no one else inside it can perceive.

One rainy day he murders Ashok by bludgeoning him with a broken liquor bottle. He then manages to flee to Bangalore with his young nephew. There he bribes the police in order to help start his own driving service. When one of his drivers kills a bike messenger Balram pays off the family and police. Balram explains that his family was almost certainly killed by the Stork as retribution for Ashok's murder. At the end of the novel Balram rationalizes his actions by saying that his freedom is worth the lives of Ashok and his family and the monetary success of his new taxi company.

Asked whether it is the anger of Adiga himself, Adiga answers as follows:

The novel is written in "voice"—in Balram's voice—and not in mine. Some of the things that he's confused by or angry about are changes in India that I approve of; for instance, he is uncomfortable with (as many men like him are) the greater freedom that women have in today's India. Some of the other things he's unhappy about—like corruption—are easier for me to identify with. When talking to many men whom I met in India, I found a sense of rage, often suppressed for years and years, that would burst out when they finally met someone they could talk to. But their anger was not the anger of a liberal, middle-class man at a corrupt system; it was something more complex—a blend of values both liberal and reactionary—and I wanted to be true to what I'd heard. Balram's anger is not an anger that the reader should participate in entirely—it can seem 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 (Nick 2008).

The Indian readers responded compassionately to his outspoken, innocent frankness with regard to social problems of our Indian society. Since the publication of his first novel *The White Tiger* Aravind Adiga has been considered an important voice of his generation, exemplified by a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian person rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists. Adiga's provocative novels are known for their unflinchingly honest urban life, and roles of downtrodden people in traditional Indian society, issues of postcolonial identity, and the political and personal struggles of marginalized people. As Adiga quotes in the novel *The White Tiger* is: "The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen" (27).

The White Tiger oozes with a sense of what it must be like for a young person growing up in a modern Indian village with no familial support or economic means to make it in life. Adiga through the voice of protagonist says in his novel *The White Tiger* as:

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 the 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 (10-11).

Here he links India's school education with poverty. 'White Tiger', the name given to the young boy while at school, becomes his moniker as he makes his way into the nefarious world of corrupt officials and crime bosses. Because he is literate, he has become groomed to be a driver and lackey for a rich family in Delhi. Balram becomes quickly acquainted with and is expected to handle, the nastiest of situation that involves murder, cheating, bribery and stealing. It is from behind the wheel of Honda Civic that this keenly intelligent young man tells the engrossing story as he changes his way from place to place in the big city, doing his master's bidding. His fellow chauffeur, meanwhile, are simply pawns who are not aware of the role they play in the bigger picture. They are the helpless ones who are being exploited by a very unjust and dishonorable society intent on making them its doormat. We find him gradually getting sucked into the routine of committing the odd venial misdeed in order not to be ostracized by his fellow drivers. This is a fine example of how corrupt practices can destroy good intentions in any society.

Through Balram's eyes, we see India as we have never seen it before: the cockroaches and the call centres, the prostitutes and the worshippers and the water buffalo trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is impossible, the White Tiger: and with a charisma as undeniable as it is unexpected, he teaches us that religion does not create morality and money doesn't solve every problem-but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and one can get what one want out of life if one eavesdrop on the right conversations. A brutal view of India's class struggle is cunningly presented in Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger*. Balram Halwai is from the Darkness, born where India's downtrodden and unlucky are destined to rot.

Adiga's existential and crude prose animates the battle between India's wealthy and poor as Balram suffers degrading treatment at the hands of his employers (or, more appropriately, masters). There are so many examples Adiga has given for the humiliation of Balram Halwai. Balram is not only a driver for Mr. Ashok but also a servant carrying bags in the malls, cooking and molishing the legs of the stork, and so on. The mean mentality of the rich shown through the lost coin episode. A one rupee coin of Mangoose, the brother of Mr. Ashok is lost while getting out of the car. He was so mean minded and he asked Balram to search for it . As Adiga writes,

Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car.' I goty down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a doe, all in search of that one rupee.

What to you mean, it is not thesere? Don't think you can steal from us just because you are in the city. I want that rupee'.

We've just paid half a million rupees in a bribe, Mukesh, and now we are screwing this man over a single rupee. Let's go up and have a scotch.'

That's how you corrupt servants. It starts with one rupee. Don't bring your American ways here'.

Where that rupee coin went remains a mystery to me to 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 Mangoose (139).

It is really ridiculous that the master is so bothered about one rupee after bribing so many million of rupees. This is our India. Balram was from a small town and his English pronunciation is perfect. He was asked to say the word 'Pizza' as Balram always says 'Pijja' and they taunted him humiliated him before so many people. He was also dressed like Maharja for Pinky Madam's enjoyment. These are all so many incidents which gradually influenced him to become a criminal. One such worst incident added a feather on the cap was that Ashok's wife Pinky kills a man in drunken driving. Balram was forced to accept the crime and asked to sign a statement as follows:

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

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

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects on the night of January 23rd this year..... That I was along in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almight God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one (Adiga 167).

This is a biting reality. As Adiga mentions in *The White Tiger* that

...the jails in Delhi are full of drivers who are there 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).

So these horrible incidents persuade him to get out of these things and become a free bird for that he has killed his master and decamp with his money. His personal fortunes and luck improve dramatically after he kills his boss and decamps for Bangalore. Balram is a clever and resourceful narrator with a witty and sarcastic edge that endears him to readers, even as he rails about corruption, allows himself to be defiled by his bosses, spews coarse, invective and eventually profits from moral ambiguity and outright criminality. It's the perfect antidote to lyrical India. Although said to be disappearing in urban India, the caste system still remains in rural India. A

person is born into a caste, and the caste one belongs to determines his or her occupation. Balram gives his own breakdown of the caste system in India, describing that it was a "... clean, well-kept orderly zoo" (63). But no longer - because that caste system broke down, and the powerful with the big bellies took over anything they could - and now there are only two castes in India - the haves and the have nots. Balram was born into the Halwai caste, meaning 'sweet-maker', and was the son of a rickshaw puller - not a sweet-maker, because someone with power stole his destiny of being a sweet-maker from him. He decides to cheer his masters to become a bellied man, by resorting to corrupt ways he has learnt through bribery, crime, disregarding all civilized ways of life.

Adiga brings awareness to the corrupt India caste system by having Balram work the country's system to get what he wants and to become an entrepreneur by any means necessary, including murdering his boss. Balram narrates the Chinese Premier throughout his letters about the corruption and immoral ways of India's caste system and its economic gap. Although it may seem that Balram's position in society will forever remain the same, he manages to go from a sweet shop worker, to a personal driver for a rich man, and finally to an owner of a small business. *The White Tiger* at one level can be thoroughly dismissed as another India-bashing book. It takes a grim view of everything and slams every Indian evil-caste system. Poverty, poor-rich divide, etc that has already undergone enough literary battering by several Indian authors writing in English. The novel is a breath-taking piece of storytelling: the novel is in simple language, minimal plot detours and wry humour. As Nakul Krishna presents in New Stateman,

The novel's framing as a seven-part letter to the Chinese prime minister turns out to be an unexpectedly flexible instrument in Adiga's hands, accommodating everything from the helpful explanatory aside to digressions into political polemic. One might note the distinctive narrative voice, rich with the disconcerting smell of coarse authenticity. It is simultaneously able to convey the seemingly congenial servility of the language of the rural poor as well as its potential for knowing subversion. It sends up the neo-Thatcherite vocabulary of the new rich, their absurd extravagance and gaudy taste, but manages to do it tenderly and with understanding. Adiga's style calls to mind the work of Munshi Premchand, that great Hindi prose stylist and chronicler of the nationalist movement.(27 March 2008).

The White Tiger takes place in the modern day world where increased technology has led to world globalization, and India is no exception. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Specifically Americanization in India has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste.

Throughout the book, there are references to how Balram is very different from those he grew up with. He is referred to as the 'White Tiger' that also a symbol for freedom and individuality. Balram is seen as different from those he grew up with. He is the one who got out of the 'Darkness' and found his way into the 'Light.' As Adiga says, "See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like the poor"(225). Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. Climbing

up the social ladder, Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and overcomes the social obstacles that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the novel, Adiga talks about how Balram was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop.

The novel is somewhat of a memoir of Balram's journey to find his freedom in modern day capitalist society. The work shows a modern day, with free market and free business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, but social castes. The novel portrays India's society as negative towards the lower social caste. When Balram was asked which caste he was from, he knew that it could ultimately cause a biased stance in his employer and determine the future of his employment. There is definitely a big difference seen in Balram's lower caste from back home and his current higher caste in their lifestyles, habits, and standards of living. This novel reflects how our economic system today creates socioeconomic gaps that create a big division in society. It limits opportunity, social mobility, health, and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all. As Soumya Bhattacharya, puts in *The Independent*,

Aravind Adiga's riveting, razor-sharp debut novel explores with wit and insight the realities of these two Indias, and reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of the other. The pace, superbly controlled in the opening and middle sections, begins to flag a bit towards the end. But this is a minor quibble: Adiga has been gutsy in tackling a complex and urgent subject. His is a novel that has come not a moment too soon (11 Apr 2008).

The author frequently mentions the rooster coop when describing the situation or characteristics of the servant class in India and he also defends himself for murdering his master with it. The author first describes how the rooster coop looks like in the market in Old Delhi, in order to give the visualization to the target audience:

Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as 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. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they are next, yet they cannot rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with humans in this country(173-4).

However, the chickens are not trying to escape from the poor-constructed cage. The author compares those chickens living in a miserable condition with the poor class in India. Balram, being a White Tiger escapes from the coop for freedom. From his analysis of the structure of the inequality in the country, the author comes to believe that liability for the suffering of the servant also lies with the mentality of the servant class, which he refers as 'perpetual servitude'. This ideology is so strong that "one can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse"(147). According to his philosophy, individual action is the key to break out of the rooster coop and the servants are self-trapping. He validates his evil actions to his master by saying, "I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Mr. Ashok – who, for all his numerous virtues,

was not much of a master – to be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace them.”(257).

Balram’s quest to becoming an entrepreneur shows the oppression of the lower caste system and the superiority of the upper caste. He tells the story of how India still has a caste system and political and economic corruption is still present. Balram shows the country of India in which a person high on the caste system can bribe people such as police officers with money to cover up murders, sabotage political opponents by rigging votes and money, and have privileges such as shopping in a mall specifically for those of high social and economic importance. He also shows the side of India in which those who are born into poverty and low castes may forever remain there and so will their children. Balram is a rare exception, as he experiences both sides of the caste system and manages to move up the social ladder. According to Adiga poor people are the victim of economic inequality of our society like we see Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger*. He wants to take revenge of all the actions of his master. He wants to get rid of the slaveness. He tries to do all these things by visiting prostitutes because he has seen his master Asok enjoying life with girls in the malls and hotels. As Mr. Ashok always traveled with golden hair womem and had sex, Balram also wants to take pleasure with the women in golden hair:

I held it up to the light.
A strand of golden hair
I’ve got it in my desk to this day (Adiga 221-222).

Balram’s commentary is replete with incongruity, contradiction and anger that runs like a toxin through out every page. As Adrian Turpin reviews,

Balram’s violent bid for freedom is shocking. What, we’re left to ask, does it make him -- just another thug in India’s urban jungle or a revolutionary and idealist ? It’s a sign of this book’s quality, as well as of its moral seriousness, that it keeps you guessing to the final page and beyond." –(Financial Times 19 Apr 2008).

As Adiga says “Balram’s anger is not an anger that the reader should participate in entirely-it an seem 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”(DiMartino 2008). In portraying the character of Balram, Adiga has succeeded in projecting him as a person with an antisocial disorder.

As Balram’s education expands, he grows more corrupt. Yet the reader’s sympathy for the former tea boy never flags. In creating a character who is both witty and psychopathic, Mr Adiga has produced a hero almost as memorable as Pip, proving himself the Charles Dickens of the call-centre generation. (The Economist)

Mainly the actions of the psychopathic are influenced by the actions of others. They are perverted. They are interested only in their personal needs and desires without concern for the effects of their behaviour on others. So the mission of Balram is completed by killing his master and become a big entrepreneur. As Adiga puts in As Adiga says,

At points it does get like that. But this is the servant's perspective. It is his subjective views, which are pretty depressing. There are also two crimes that he commits: he robs, and he kills, and by no means do I expect a reader to sympathize with both the crimes. He's not meant to be a figure whose views you should accept entirely. There's evidence within the novel that the system is more flexible than Balram suggests, and it is breaking down faster than he claims. And within the story I hope that there's evidence of servants cheating the masters systematically...to suggest a person's capacity for evil or vice is to grant them respect—is to acknowledge their capacity for volition and freedom of choice (Sawhney 2008).

So the innocent village boy from Laxmangarh goes to New Delhi and works as a driver, humiliated by his masters, learnt corrupt practices and bribing money to buy politicians and policemen to kill and loot at last decides to kill his master and steal the money (Rs. 7,00,000/-) and became an entrepreneur. His thirst for freedom made him to do so. So his actions makes the audience thinks about the Indians and many types of aspirants and frustration they represent.

The novel is an intelligent and ruthless portrait of India in which downtrodden people like Balram suffers under the rich. Here the author shows the true picture of Indian society. He also educates the masses about the criminals who are born due to inequality, corruption and injustice in the society. But the Indian people should not overlook the bloody acts, opportunism, entrepreneurial success of people like Balram and emergence of Socialists in India, and it is the duty of each and every citizen that they should try their level best not to indulge in corruption activities (taking and giving) which may give birth to so many Balrams which is very very dangerous to the society.

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