

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

*December 2013 Vol. 4 Issue-VI*

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## ***The White Tiger: Challenges of Urbanization***

**Veena Sindhu**

Asst. Professor

Govt. College Badli, Jhajjar

Haryana, India

Recent years have witnessed a large number of Indian English fiction writers who have stunned the literary world with their works. The topics dealt with are contemporary and populist and the English is functional, communicative and unpretentious. Novels have always served as a guide, a beacon in a conflicting, chaotic world and continue to do so. A careful study of Indian English fiction writers show that there are two kinds of writers who contribute to the genre of novels: The first group of writers include those who are global Indians, writers, who are Indians by birth but have lived abroad, so they see Indian problems and reality objectively. The second group of writers are those born and brought up in India, exposed to the attitudes, morale and values of the society. Hence their works focus on the various social problems of India like unemployment, poverty, class discrimination, social dogmas, rigid religious norms, inter caste marriages, plight of women etc.

Lately Indian novelist has shifted from rural to metro India, which is the living soul of the country. The problems of urbanization and the problems faced by the people of metro India find a powerful expression in Indian English fiction.

Aravind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger* published in 2008, and a winner of Booker Prize examines the issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption, urbanization and poverty in India. The novel besides receiving critical acclaim was also lambasted by some in India for giving in to western prejudices and playing up to their image of a poverty stricken, slum governed country. Some even went to the extent of calling it a western conspiracy to deny the country's economic progress. It seems like a tourist's account of India, the poverty depicted seems to mock and humiliate the so called booming economy of modern India (Saxena 9).

Amitava Kumar finds *The White Tiger* inauthentic and states that after Rushdie many non resident Indian authors have taken refuge in magical realism and have gone farther into inauthenticity. He finds the villains depicted by Adiga to be cartoonish and the depiction of ordinary people to be offensive and far removed from reality. (Kumar 2)

In Kevin Rushby's opinion the novel *The White Tiger* is a witty parable of India's changing society, the scales have fallen from the eyes of some Indian writers, many either living abroad or educated there like Adiga. While reviewing the novel for *The Guardian* he states: "The home country is invariably presented as a place of brutal injustice and sordid corruption, one in which the poor are always disposed and victimised by their age old enemies, the rich. Characters at the colourful extremities of society are Dickensian grotesques – Phiz sketches, adrift in a country that is lurching rapidly towards bland middle – class normality. This seems to be fundamentally an outsiders view and a superficial one."

The novel gives relentless detailed description of various evil aspects of Indian life. It is a social commentary on the divide between the rich and the poor. Balram Halwai represents the exploited and the downtrodden section of the society juxtaposed against the rich (Saxena 9). Characters seem caricatures and symbols. At times even an Indian reader finds it difficult to identify with it. For example, it is difficult to accept the way Balram Halwai so easily casts off his family, when he says, “Only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed – hunted, beaten and burned alive by the masters – can break out of the coop, that would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature”(150). Ultimately we do see Balram break out of the coop at the cost of his family. In cities like Bangalore and Delhi which draw young people from their villages, family relations can be seen getting stretched. The importance of family is getting eroded. This modern novel about the dark side of New India takes a sharp look at the reality of India’s economic miracle. Former editor of Times Asia, William Green feels that, “The White Tiger is an unsettling novel, it touches very raw nerves, but I think Adiga captures the complexity and subtlety of India in fiction in a way that you don’t see in journalism.”

The aim of this paper is to understand the challenges of urbanization as presented in the novel *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. The emerging pattern of internal migration shows that it is mostly the people from lower social - economic strata of society who migrate from rural to metro cities and this is due to the changing nature of economy.

The unpleasant reality of contemporary Indian society is depicted here. We see that injustice and inequality has always been around but is now leading to social discontent which ultimately results in violence. Adiga focuses on the growing divide between the rich and the poor and the economic system that lets a small minority prosper at the expense of the large majority. Since the introduction of liberal economic reforms and open market in India the economic disparity has increased (Sebastian 230). On one side we have the millionaires living in their air conditioned tower blocks and on the other hand there are the unfortunates trapped in poverty, literally living below them catering to their every whim. The novel also examines the culture of servitude in India which pitches the rich against the poor. Other themes touched on include migration from rural to urban cities, rising crime and corruption which has become a feature of Indian society and politics, family loyalty versus independence, the issue of child labour, the problem of caste system, religious tension between Hindus and Muslims, the experience of returning to India after living in America and globalization.

In an interview to Stuart Jeffries Adiga says his novel, “attempts to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India – the voice of the colossal underclass.” It shows that the present economic system is the root cause of all evil. It has created a big division in society and has led to disproportionate distribution of wealth in society. The rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer. It focuses on the problems of the youth moving from their villages to the cities and then finding limited- opportunity, social mobility, health and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all.

The novel is a memoir of the protagonist’s journey to finding his freedom in India’s modern day capitalist society. The story unfolds over seven days and nights in Bangalore in an

epistolary form. Balram narrates his life in a letter which he wrote in seven consecutive nights addressed to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabo. In his letter he explains how he, the son of a rickshaw puller, escaped the life of servitude to become a successful entrepreneur. Towards the beginning of the novel Balram cites a poem from the Muslim poet Iqbal where he talks of slaves and says, “They remain slaves because they can’t see what is beautiful in this world” (34). He talks about how he was a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. Born in a low caste in a village in heartland India, Laxmangarh, he lived with his grandmother, parents, brother and extended family. Balram vividly describes the poverty in his village. While describing his father’s thin, powerless, scarves filled body he states that “The story of a poor man’s life is written on his body in a sharp pen” (27). Forced to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin’s dowry he begins to work in a teashop with his brother in Dhanbad. As he crushes coals and wipes tables he nurses a dream of escape – of breaking away from the banks of mother Ganga, which is a symbol of darkness for him, “Ganga of black”(57). Growing up he was exposed to a lot of corruption and immoral behaviour. He has seen the vote rigging of local elections. He has witnessed the teacher stealing money from school food programme and selling the uniforms meant for students because he has not been paid salary for six months and everyone accepts the fact that anyone in power would abuse it for his own benefit.

Balram soon learns how to drive and gets a job driving Ashok, the westernized son of the stork, the local landlord. He moves to Delhi with Ashok and Pinky madam. Throughout their time in Delhi Balram is exposed to extensive corruption in Indian society including the government. He sees Ashok’s family bribe government ministers and national elections being rigged. Ashok’s brother Mukesh tells him:

The minister wants more. It’s election time. Every time there’s election, we hand out cash. Usually to both sides, but this time the government is going to win for sure. The opposition is in a total mess. So we just have to pay off the government which is good for us. (239)

In New Delhi the separation between the rich and the poor becomes even more evident by juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers. As Balram says, “Please understand your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an India of light, and an India of darkness” (14). World globalization is a result of increasing technology and it is India’s rise as a modern global economy that leads Ashok, Pinky madam and Balram to Gurgaon. Ashok justifies this move by saying, “Today it is the modernist suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft all the big American companies have offices here: The main road is full of shopping malls – each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her” (101). Ashok is even convinced that India is surpassing the USA, “There are so many more things I could do here than in New York now – The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years” (77). Balram too is noticing the rapid growth. This rapid growth is tempting and luring the youth from their homes to these cities with big dreams only to shatter them, snapping their family ties, destroying their innocence, leading them to disillusionment and on path of corruption. “Those poor bastards had come from Darkness to Delhi to find some light but they were still in darkness” says Balram (138). In countryside name, family and religion is everything. One

works according to what their caste permits, people in uniform represent power and influence. Urban life is directly opposite to this – family is dispensable as it becomes for Balram. He soon stops sending money home. He commits the murder of his master, Ashok knowing fully well the retribution to his family. “I’ve made it! I’ve broken out of the coop! I’ve given myself away (295). For his own good and freedom he has accepted the death of his family, in fact he has been instrumental for their death. Though caste still plays an important role in the rural areas, in this new capitalist Indian society names and castes have become unimportant. Balram gives his own breakdown of the caste system in India when he says that earlier it was like a clean, well kept orderly zoo, but no longer because the caste system broke down and powerful bellies took over anything they could. Old morals don’t count here and money seems to rule the city. Sharp economic divisions are created. As Balram says, “These days there are just two castes: men with Big Bellies, and men with small Bellies. Only two destinies; eat or get eaten up” (64). Balram is an exception as he experiences both sides of the caste system and manages to move up the social ladder.

Adiga in his novel shows that side of India where those who are born in poverty and low caste are destined to remain there forever and so are their children. This is how far a servant can dream, “If you save from today, you’ll make enough to buy a small home in some slum” (193). All good and real properties are kept for the rich. Poor can only get worse things even if it is a blonde prostitute with dyed hair or Indian made foreign liquor. Shopping malls are specifically for those of high economic and social importance. Bouncers are there at the malls to keep the servants out by identifying them by their clothes. Balram mentions the rooster coop when describing the servant class in India. He visualizes the rooster coop as:

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, 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. (167)

However the chickens don’t even think of trying to break out of the poorly constructed coop because they are so busy trying to find a breathing space in order to keep alive. In Balram’s opinion “99.9 percent of us are caught in the rooster coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market” (168). It is not that these men are not as capable as the rich but they are taught to be slaves so well that they make no effort to break out of the coop. They are yelled at, ill treated, stay in the servant quarter in the basement of the building where their masters live. Balram says that it is the mentality of the servant class which is responsible for their suffering. He refers to it as perpetual servitude. This ideology is so strong “You can put the key of emancipation in a man’s hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse” (147). He feels that individual action is the key to break out of the rooster coop. Balram 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 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).

The White Tiger portrays the feelings, emotions, aspiration, sorrows and the simmering anger and hatred of the till now invisible poor. “A billion servants secretly fantasize about

strangling their bosses” (125). For Adiga, his achievement is capturing, “something new in India, a stirring, a glimmer of refusal by the poor to accept the fate ordained for them by their master.” Still the current social order where the poor slave 24/7 as cooks, cleaners, drivers, nannies and maids so that the well off can feel comfortable continues (Jeffries). Balram says that the rich of America or England, who have no servant, cannot even begin to understand what a good life is. In his letter to the Chinese premier he writes:

Now I say they took me on as their ‘driver’ I don’t know exactly how you organise your servants in China, but in India – or at least in the darkness – the rich don’t have drivers, cooks, barbers and tailors. They simply have servants. What I mean is that anytime I was not driving the car, I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a broom or chase a cow out of the compound. (68)

Balram is even made to wash, massage and dry the two Pomeranians dogs ‘Cuddle and Puddle’ (78) of his master like human beings. Driving his master and his wife to the shopping malls and call centres Balram becomes increasingly aware of immense wealth and opportunity all around him. Brooding over his situation and wanting to become a part of this glamorous India he realizes, “we have left the villages, but the masters still own us - body, soul and arse” (169). Balram is just not free in India and constantly feels that he is under the control of his master. “A rooster was escaping from the coop! A hand was thrust out – I was picked up by the neck and shoved back into the coop” (234). He wants to experience ‘just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute what it means not to be a servant’ (321). His willingness to go to jail for the hit and run committed by Pinky madam shows that he is a prisoner of the rooster coop too. Though his masters make him suffer for the mistakes they make, he doesn’t even think of defending himself. He is ready to do anything he is told because the desire to be a servant has been bred into him. Only when Ashok shouts at him for claiming to massage his feet, he realizes how much of a servant he has become. He is caught in his position and will stay in it forever. He doesn’t like it and he realises that there is just one chance to be completely free and to be his own master – and the thought of murdering Ashok enters his mind for the first time. His loyalty to his master first crackles when he is forced by Mukesh sir to take this blame of hit and run.

Gradually we see Balram changing from an “innocent village boy into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness” (189), a result of urbanization. All compunctions leave him when he starts betraying his master. Instead of feeling guilt he feels rage as he slowly realises how much he has already suffered and he tries to imitate his master and his lifestyle. He starts from simple crime of selling empty whiskey bottles to selling petrol of the car and using it as a free lance taxi. He visits the prostitutes and ultimately murders Ashok and flees with seven lakh rupees to Bangalore.

Balram has been exposed to much wickedness in the city. He attributes his moral downfall to his master. He says all these changes were first seen in Ashok-“Once the master of Honda City becomes corrupt, how can the driver stay innocent?”(197). He was a good servant to an honest man but with degradation of Ashok began his degradation too. At times Balram is in conflict with his conscience when he says, “Your heart has become even blacker than that,

Munna” (249). Ultimately he begins planning to break out of the Rooster coop. From an innocent servant he turns into an evil murderer. In a cold blooded manner he hits his master, kills him by breaking his neck and flees with 700,000 rupees.

Now begins his new life in Bangalore. He discovers the most important business aspect, which is outsourcing. He develops the idea of a taxi service. He changes his name to Ashok Sharma, bribes a police commissioner who needs extra money to meet his expenses, as his two sons are studying in America. Finally Balram manages to open his own taxi company. Soon his ‘start up business’ (301) grows into a big business with twenty six vehicles and sixteen drivers. He becomes a wealthy ‘entrepreneur’ in India’s new technological society. He admits in the letter that he writes that India has thousands and thousands of entrepreneurs even though it is unable to provide its citizens the basic facility of drinking water, electricity, sewerage system or public transportation.

Balram writes these letters to the Chinese premier who is about to visit India to learn why it is so good at producing entrepreneurs. Balram presumes to tell him how to win power and influence people. Adiga makes a dig at the so called Indian economic progress when in a satirical vein he makes Balram the spokesperson for such wisdom - as his own story is a story of social injustice, poverty, corruption, bribery, moral degradation, theft and murder.

No writer is brought up in seclusion, unexposed to the world around him, so any work of literature is bound to reflect the attitude, values and morals of the prevailing society. A writer transports the real life events and experiences of society into fiction, thus presenting a mirror to society whereby people can look at themselves and make amends. The novel *The White Tiger* presents an account of the urban as well as the rural society through its portrayal of Laxmangarh, Gaya, Dhandbad, Delhi and Bangalore. Though it was much criticised in India for the unglamorous image it presented of India’s economic miracle and for pondering to the western prejudices of how the rich treat the servant class, we cannot reject the truth and reality projected:

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 bridges and overpasses, making fire and washing and taking out lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them. (119)

According to *The Indian Express* dated 16 July 2011, the census data of 2011 revealed that more people were added in urban centres as compared to rural areas. Between 2001 and 2011 the number of people living in urban areas increased from 286 million to 377 million, a rise of 91 million. In comparison, the rural population increased by 90 million, up from 734 million in 2001 to 833 million. Now the urban population accounts for 31.16% of the total population of the country, up from 27.81%.

The overcrowded metro cities are not equipped to handle such migrations, leading to problems of housing, lack of health care facilities, basic amenities’ of water, electricity, public transportation and security. The sights of beggars – children, women and old at traffic signals, increasing incidents of crime and murder committed by servants against their

masters, ill treatment meted out to old parents and servants are indications of the moral degradation that has set in the urban society, which revolves around money. Adiga feels that the underclass is very important in the story of India's progress, they cannot be ignored or sidelined. Balram represents the conscience of the underprivileged - their anger, frustration, helplessness and protest. The murder of Ashok is a reaction of the deep rooted frustration of the underclass experiencing the polarity between the upper class and lower class. The transformation of the central character from Munna to Balram Halwai to White Tiger and finally Ashok Sharma indicates the rise of the underclass (Singh 103).

Aravind Adiga postulates, "I don't think a novelist should just write about his experiences. This is the reality for a lot of Indians and it is important that it gets written about, rather than just hearing about the five percent of people in my country who are doing well." In his interview to The Guardian he further says, "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. It is not an attack on the country, it is about the great process of self examination. 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 am trying to do."

He further says in his interview to Stuart Jeffries that the challenges that are further holding back India are corruption, lack of health services for the poor and the presumption that the family is always the repository of good. All this is getting aggravated as we are moving away from our rural roots towards the fast paced, impersonal life in urban cities as reflected in the novel *The White Tiger*.

### **Works Cited:**

- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. India: Harper Collins, 2008. Print.
- Jeffries, Stuart. "Roars of Anger: Interview of Aravind Adiga." *Guardian* 16 Oct. 2008. Web. 23 Sep. 2013.
- Kumar, Amitava. "View Point: Literary Review." *The Hindu*. 2 Nov. 2008: 1-2. Print.
- Rushby, Kevin. Rev. of *The White Tiger*, by Aravind Adiga. *Guardian* 15 Oct. 2008. Web. 20 Sep. 2013.
- Saxena, Shobhan. "Fact not Fiction." *Sunday Times of India* 19 Oct. 2008: 9. Print.
- Sebastian, A.J. "Poor-Rich Divide in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Journal of Alternative Perspective in the Social Sciences* 1.2 (2009): 229-245. Print.
- Singh, Krishna. "Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger: The Voice of the Underclass- A Post Colonial Dialectics*." *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 1.2 (2009): 98-112. Print.