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Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: Injustice and Poverty in the Present Scenario

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Abstract:

Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize winning debut novel *The White Tiger* is sharp, fascinating, attacks poverty and inequality without being sentimental. For this reason it is a ground breaking Indian novel. It is completely from the perspective of a servant. To describe the present Indian conditions in which poor people try to make both ends meet, the narrator uses this strange word 'the darkness'. The novel conveys the lives of India's poor in a realistic and sympathetic manner. Adiga held *The White Tiger* the best fictional writing on his home land, as this novel went beyond the organized outset of the natives and attempted to illustrate the multifarious, often conflicting and mostly aggressive impact of imperial rule in modern India. This paper attempts to analyze Adiga's point of view about, how in India, in the present scenario the poor are more invisible than ever before; be it the resurgent Naxalite, armed rebellion in the heart of India, or the communist guerrillas, fighting in the name of the poor, are waging a brutal war against the state. *The White Tiger* is a story about a man's quest for freedom. Balram, the protagonist in this novel is the victim of poverty and injustice who worked out his way out of his low caste and overcame the social obstacle that curtailed his family in the past and completed his mission by killing his master, stealing his money, and become a successful entrepreneur. This is Adiga's painful and realistic picture of modern India.

Keywords: White Tiger, snooty, servant, poverty, darkness, multifarious, injustice.

The entire history of Indian English novel can broadly be divided into two periods; pre-independence and post-independence. The pre-independence novelists mainly wrote under the influence of Gandhism and nationalism. They devoted their novels on the one hand, to the exposition of social evils, customs and traditions, rites and rituals, poverty and illiteracy and on the other, made their works a powerful medium of highlighting the east-west encounter and of spreading the nationalistic ideas. The theme of freedom struggle occupied an important place among the major concern of pre-independence English novels.

Another most significant feature of the post-independence novels produced during the period 1950-1980 was a shift of emphasis from the external to the internal. The socio-political issues: the individual problems, Industrialization, urbanization, globalization and modernization constitute the minor themes recurrently and consistently used in the post-independence novels. The scenario of urban life

represented by pictures of the chaos raised voices and ragging tempers, squalors, honkers caught the attention of the distinguished novelists like V.S., Naipaul, R.P. Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shahsi Deshpande, Kamla Markandaya and Aravind Adiga.

India's economic growth is continuously increasing at par to America. But the conditions of poor people remain the same. Their wages has been increased only marginally. This is the main theme that Aravind Adiga focused in his novel *The White Tiger* which has won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2008. This book also happens to be his debut novel. According to Adiga these poor people mostly hail from Bihar, Nepal and Bangladesh. They work as drivers, cook, domestic help, gardeners, construction workers and as full time servants and fulfil all the needs of their masters. Adiga's *The White Tiger* mainly focuses on the problems of poor people who are living under crushing poverty. As Adiga puts in *The White Tiger*,

These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh...The slum ended in an open sewer – a small river of black water went sluggishly past me, bubbles sparkling in it and ...Two children were splashing about in the black water (260).

The protagonist in Adiga's novel, Balram Halwai is one such a servant from Bihar. He is narrating his complete journey from the small village called Laxmangarh, Bihar to the IT city Bangalore. He is the narrator of the story and confesses his act to the Chinese Premier. Being an intelligent but poor boy who discontinues his studies due to the family circumstances and who was nick named by a school inspector as The White Tiger, Balram gets a job as a driver for a corrupted business man Ashok at Delhi. Being humiliated so many times by his master and his family, Balram adopts dreadful way to become an entrepreneur. His master shows false sympathy to him but leaves no chance to humiliate him. Apart from that, they have framed Balram as a murderer, for that he was asked to sign a statement stating that he has killed a child while driving. Actually Pinky Ashok's wife killed a child while driving in a drunken stage. These pressures made him to kill his master and abscond with the money of his boss that was kept for bribing a politician. He finds no other away to come up in life. He started a taxi company at Bangalore and became a successful entrepreneur. Here the author shows the mentality of the protagonist is like The White Tiger which is different from other animals and it is dangerous also. Balram wants to lead a life independently like The White Tiger and he too is dangerous.

India is the world's greatest democracy, yet the poor people are in their same condition. They don't have freedom or power to do anything. The main focus of Adiga's novels is that even though India is a developing economy the poor are still under poverty line. They have very little political freedom especially in a place like Bihar. Adiga gives a true picture about election period and political power of poor Indians and the failure of India's election system. Finger prints of all the youngsters whether they are eighteen or below has been taken by the stork and he will just sell it to the social activists and earn so much money. Poor people then work for this social activist till the election is over and vote for him dreaming of some better life but they will get only ' mutton biryani' on paper plates as the politicians will never turn back. The Great Socialist himself is said to have embezzled one billion rupees from the

Darkness, and transferred the money into a bank account in a small, beautiful country in Europe full of white people and black money. As he puts in *The White Tiger*,

These are the three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera, and election fever. The last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in (Adiga 99).

Even in an interview Adiga's remark about Indian politics is as follows:

The fact that a lot of Indians have very little political freedom, especially in the north of India. That elections are rigged in large parts of the north Indian state of Bihar, and they're also accompanied by violence. There's like thirty-five killings during every election. If you were a poor man you'd have to pick China over India any day because your kids have a better chance of being nourished if you're poor. Your wife is more likely to survive childbirth. You're likely to live longer. There are so many ways in which India's system fails horribly (Sawhney 2008).

This enthralling work attacks poverty and inequality without being sentimental or snooty, and for this reason it is a groundbreaking Indian novel. Here Adiga talked about all the problems of poor people in the modern economy. Balram is the living example of the sufferings of poor people. In the childhood Balram has to discontinue his studies due to poverty. He lost his father due to tuberculosis. Adiga explains how poor people treated at the Government Hospital and how they die without the treatment of the doctors. Here we can understand how the doctors are appointed under the influence of social activists by bribing them. The condition of Government hospital is even worst. Adiga explains the condition of Government hospital as follows:

LOHIA UNIVERSAL FREE HOSPITAL
PROUDLY INAUGURATED BY THE GREAT SOCIALIST
A HOLY PROOF THAT HE KEEPS HIS PROMISES

Kishan and I carried our father in, stamping on the goat turds which had spread like a constellation of black stars on the ground. There was no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy, after we bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening...It's not safe, in the rooms-that cat has tasted blood... There's a Government medical superintendent who's meant to check the doctors visit village hospitals like this. Now each time this post falls vacant, the Great socialist lets all the big doctors know that he's having an open auction for that post. The going rate for this post is about four hundred thousand rupees these days (Adiga 49-50).

In India we can see the rich people hiring many servants for all their work like drivers, watchman, cook, laundryman etc. Sometimes one man does all the work. These rich people are pitiless. The drivers are treated like servants. As Adiga remarks in *The White Tiger*,

Now, I say they took me as their ‘driver’. I don’t exactly know how you organize 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. (68).

They used to carry shopping bags of their masters who have purchased goods from the shopping Mall but these drivers are not allowed to enter the big Malls. As Adiga says,

What was happening Mr. Premier, was one of those incidents that were so common in the early days of the shopping mall, and which they are reported in the daily newspapers under the title, ‘Is There No space for the Poor in the Malls of New India?’ (148).

When some accident takes place because of the masters the drivers are victimised like a sacrificial goat offering and sent to jail. According to a passage from the *The White Tiger*,

The jails of 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, bodies, souls, and arse. Yes, that’s right: we all live in one of the world’s greatest democracies. What a fucking joke (Adiga 169).

To describe the Indian conditions in which poor people try to make ends meet, the narrator uses this strange general term, “the darkness.” He was trying to capture this gulf in the country. When the author was in Calcutta, he spent the night with people who pulled hand-rickshaws. A lot of these hand-rickshaw drivers were Muslims from Bihar, and he asked them,

Why do you do this? Why don’t you work in the fields? Even that has to be better than this. One man pointed to the shed in which they were staying and said, This may seem to you like a dirty dark place, but for us, this is a city of light. Back home is the darkness (Sawhney 2008).

Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is completely from a servant’s perspective. Because Balram was humiliated by all his masters, he wants to take revenge that lead to murder. Balram wants to come out of the rooster coop. So he robs and kills his own master to become rich.

In the programme, ‘You ask the question’, replying to a query on poverty, internal unrest and terrorism in India Adiga Says,

These problems have been brewing for a long time. The causes are complex, but one common theme I find is the heightened tension within the country that’s caused by the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The flare-ups can often take the form of ethnic or regional protests, but the underlying grievances are often economic: “those people who live over there are doing much better than we are.” Fixing the economic disparities has to be part of nay attempt to address India’s growing unrest. The country’s intelligence and

police agencies need to be reformed and modernised; right now they seem way behind the terrorists (Interview *The Independent* 10 Nov 2008).

Adiga is arguably the greatest exponent of Indian Writing in English whose literary output was infused with a political commitment that conveyed the lives of India's poor in a realistic and sympathetic manner. Adiga held *The White Tiger* the best fictional writing on his home land, as this novel went beyond the organized outset of the 'natives' and attempted to illustrate the multifarious, often conflicting and mostly aggressive impact of regal rule in India. He had wanted to write about the ordinary the routine life of Indians who are not Kings and Gods. With the publication of *The White Tiger*, Adiga had firmly associated himself with the brand of writers, who saw political, social and human causes as genuine inclination for the novel. Adiga interpreted the truth of people's lives in his novels/short stories which has written to give message to the general public, so that they can understand what is happening in this modern world. Adiga's *The White Tiger* exposes the division between the rich and the poor that rule India even India is becoming one of the economically forward country. As Prasannarajan reviews in *India Today*,

As a debut, it marks the arrival of a storyteller who strikes a fine balance between the sociology of the wretched place he has chosen as home and the twisted humanism of the outcast. With detached, scatological precision, he surveys the grey remoteness of an India where the disposed and the privileged are not steeped in the stereotypes of struggle and domination. The ruthlessness of power and survival assumes a million moral ambiguities in this novel powered by an India where Bangalore is built on Bihar (17th April 2008).

Balram is a representative of the poor in India longing for 'tomorrow'. His story is an allegory of the new India with a distinctly chilling twist. He is not only an entrepreneur but also a roguish criminal, remarkably capable of self-justification. The background which he operates is one of corruption, inequality and poverty (Kapur 2008). Since the gap between haves and have nots is on the rise, the violence and dissatisfaction are on the rise. According to Adiga the ever widening gap between the rich people and the poor and the economic system makes the rich people to prosper at the expense of the poor. The poor people serves the masters for their welfare as the farmers serves landlord.

In a country like India, development projects, massive privatisation and labour reforms makes the poor more poor. Adiga says India has become a globalised country but poor people are in the same state as they were before. As Indian Literature is witnessing major changes, caste, class and gender issues and similar social concerns have emerged as dominant themes in the Literature being produced in English and other various languages example Arundati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. India's untouchables are mounting a revolution against privileged upper caste. They are breaking their thousand years silence and trying to sensitize the society. Education and exposure to literature have helped the untouchables to move forward from their ideas of contamination and pollution forced upon them by the upper castes. In the post colonial era Mulk Raj Andnad's *Untouchable*, Arundati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* have truly documented the social history of the poor people. Together they constitute a powerful critique of the moral corruption and hypocrisy of

Indian society which allows untouchability to continue. The work offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of modern India. The social novels encapsulate the pain, humiliation and poverty of this community which has lived at the bottom of India's social pyramid for millennium. There are truly inspiring books that reveals untouchable's quest for dignity and the recognition of their human worth rather than to India's own succession eradicating the evils of caste system, for its inequalities and inequities persist. These novels are a sign that change is possible in India and that indeed it is progressing.

Adiga stands in the front line of Indian writing in English and is the perfectionist in the representation of his characters. He is undoubtedly the greatest artist of Indian writing in English. Adiga's main theme is deeply rooted in the social conditions of modern India. India's socio-economic inequality is the major concern and his characters represent the patterns of Indian society. He represents a society charged with the evils of untouchability, caste discrimination and social injustice. He is the greatest realist whose realism distinguishes him from any wrong bias and has the ability to take a balanced view of man and society. Adiga voices the most fundamental sentiments of a man whose life is a strange combination of helplessness, anger, protest despair and anxiety. The typical Indian lives and life of many layers each of which is inextricably linked up with others. Poverty is one such layer and it is a very vital thing for him. Adiga's realism lies in the depiction of a society in which corruption factor operates so easily and naturally.

Adiga has written his novels and short stories in the phase of his career when India is facing the problems of corruption. In the realistic depiction of Indian society, he has presented to us a class of those people whose social status is dominated by their economic status. In his master piece *The White Tiger* Adiga says how Balram is humiliated when he is not allowed in the malls because he is a driver.

The glass doors had opened, but the man who wanted to go into them could not do so. The guard at the door had stopped him. He pointed his stick at the man's feet and shook his head – the man had sandals on his feet. All of us drivers too had sandals on our feet. But everyone who was allowed into the mall had shoes on their feet...the man in the sandals exploded, 'Am I not a human being too?' (Adiga 148).

A strong believer in the dignity and the equality, Adiga was naturally shocked at the inhuman way the poor people were treated by those belonging to the superior caste. Adiga is the greatest writer of downtrodden because of his realistic portrayal of Indian society includes the social harmony and social values. Adiga wanted to describe the problems of poor people in the present scenario by giving example of usage of cell phones. Speaking of the basic necessity of water, in Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* the protagonist Balram says, "There is no water in our taps, and what do you people in Delhi give us? You give us cell phones."(269).

He also answers a question in an interview,

In fact, India has more than 240 million cell phone users. The cell phone is fascinating because it has always held up in India as a sign of progress. Even the poor have cell phones now. But access to drinking water has deteriorated

in the past ten years. And most development economists will tell you that a lack of access to drinking water—to clean water—is the single biggest cause of poverty. Say a construction worker gets typhoid and can't go to work for two weeks. He loses his job and there's no insurance. He's living in poverty and is going to stay in poverty. Throughout India you see the water table seems to be falling, crop yields are declining, people are having greater trouble finding access to water. It's one of the clearest class divides in India: if you have access to regular water in India, you're rich; if you have no access to water, you're poor. Technology is one aspect of progress; it is not progress in itself. Progress is holistic—it's water and cell phones (Sawhney 2008).

It is evident that the modern society is inescapably in the grip of the menace of divide between the marginalized and the privileged, the mighty and the weak. The privileged and the might on the one hand enjoy an upper hand in all matters and miss no opportunity in staking claim over the wealth. They should naturally and equitably fall to the share of all those who are born on this earth. They spend this wealth on their physical comfort and personal glory; whereas the underprivileged are forced to live from hand to mouth, notwithstanding their diligence and austerity. Given these conditions, the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer. This sorry state of affairs has been the focus of the works of a host of Indian English writers. While Mulk Raj Anand in pre-independence era made a mark of highlighting the afflictions of weaker sections of society, the contemporary writers such as Arundati Roy, Kiran Desai and Adiga have established themselves as pioneers of the cause of subaltern through their extensive treatment of subaltern concern in their trend setting literary works which have gained immense popularity across the globe.

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