

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# *The Criterion*

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

August 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-4

5<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

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## Why Adiga, Not Ghosh

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Year 2008, two Indians—Amitav Ghosh and Arvind Adiga—one veteran other novice; one made it even as a debut writer, other missed it even after being troupier. Scholars naturally bent to ponder on what made this young journalist turned author Arvind Adiga a prize-winner while the veteran anthropologist Amitav Ghosh a runner-up. Taking these two Indian authors and their works—*Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh and *The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga as free-standing, self-contained and autonomous literary units, I would like to focus on their comparative study, leaving other four nominees of the Man Booker prize for 2008—Sabastian Barry (*The Secret Scripture*), Linda Grant (*The Clothes on their Backs*), Phillip Hensher (*The Northern Clemency*), and Steve Toltz (*The Fraction of the Whole*).

Contemporary novels fall into two main categories. First: novels which call for serious literary criticism, further divided into two categories—(a) good novels, (b) novels which might have been good. Second: novels which are beneath serious criticism, further divided as (a) Middlebrow (b) Lowbrow. *The White Tiger* belongs to first (b), whereas *Sea of Poppies* falls into first (a) category. *The White Tiger* is a step short of becoming a *Roman à thèse*. It could be a great social novel if had been handled properly. On the other hand, *Sea of Poppies* is a masterpiece—historical novel which focuses on some serious social issues.

Generally literary units consist of two parts—narration and technique. Narration contains story in general terms, whereas technique refers to other aspects of writing such as—form, plot, point of view, style, diction, characterization—which distinguishes a ‘work of literature’ from other works of different streams of knowledge. These two aspects further lead to two types of reader—general/uninformed and trained/informed.

For general reader a novel is not a ‘piece of art’ but a ‘piece of writing’, which must satisfy their interest. They want to be entertained and relaxed. They do not want to strain their mind and nerves for something that they had chosen for mere time-pass. Time-pass, that is what a novel is for a general reader. Surely from this aspect *The White Tiger* has advantage over *Sea of Poppies*. *The White Tiger* has a story of single character (Balram) with tolerable length, whereas *Sea of Poppies* is just a first part of Ibis trilogy with five hundred and twelve pages of multiple stories of multiple characters. General readers never like lengthy novel with open ending, which left them unsatisfied, curious and compel them for further reading. Certainly, *Sea of Poppies* is not meant for every reader whereas *The White Tiger* can be enjoyed by everyone—general as well as informed.

*The White Tiger* narrates a modern man’s struggle to go up in life and its easy and quick accomplishment. In the novel, contrary to Gandhian philosophy, ends justifies means, heinous crimes are rationalized by tracing it back to atrocities and injustice done by rich. General readers are more comfortable with such stories for it confirms their beliefs. Most of us are keen to get success easily and quickly like Balram and love to blame others for our own inefficiencies and misdoings. So, anything that approves this notion is always dear to modern man. That is one of the big reasons for its popularity. No doubt, Adiga has tried to do what Milton has done in the past—glorification of evil. Balram is a modern incarnation of Satan. But whereas Satan has become larger than life because of Milton’s artistic genius, Adiga’s mediocre talent has rendered Balram with average repute. There is not a single line,

which can compete with the glory of “what thou the field be lost? / All is not lost” (Milton 105-06). On the other hand, *Sea of Poppies* is a novel which peep into the past with the help of multiple characters—some purely fictitious, some inspired by real people and some are fictional representatives of candid reality. Character like Kalua, Deeti and issues like indentured labourer and dishonouring of Raja are some of the many which cannot be enjoyed by everyone. Thus on general norm *The White Tiger* scores more than *Sea of Poppies*.

Now moving from general to technical domain, we shall first take their narration. *The White Tiger* is an epistolary novel written in first person narration, whereas *Sea of Poppies* is written in third person narration. Third person narration is quite easier than first person narration. Because in the third person narration reader is quite aware, that it is the story that is being told, whereas in the first person narration reader expects to witness the life. *Sea of Poppies* has proved itself as a good story while *The White Tiger* has failed to become a palpable account of real life. We have heard of many murders committed by servants on their masters, but in Adiga’s novel a note of falsity runs parallel to this veracity. Balram as well as other characters have failed to become real, life-like character. They were fictitious in their impression that they cast on readers.

Both the novels apparently present subaltern voices. They are asserting ‘histories from below’, written from above. Neither Adiga nor Amitav has poor background. In *The White Tiger* one can easily recognize this writer from above. Adiga fails to feel his characters and their depth, his narration became superficial and mechanical on many occasions. In Eliot’s words he has failed to convert his thought into feeling, ‘unification of sensibility’ is not visible in this case. Whereas in *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh certainly has succeeded in transforming his thought into feeling. Reader flows with its narration and hardly thinks about its author. Amitav has also an advantage—his novel did not deal with poverty alone, it also take up other issues like—East-West differences, West’s superiority-complex, gender, subjugation of women, Dalit’s helplessness, sati, multiculturalism, and hegemony. In *Sea of Poppies* the cause of subaltern has been taken up genuinely and seriously. However, *The White Tiger* though on the surface take up the cause of subaltern (especially economic), but in depth it has become ‘elitist *écriture*’ in the garb of ‘poor’s *écriture*’. The word ‘poor’ has finally become catachresis. In the novel, it presents a creed that is so desperate to become rich by hook or by crook, ready to sacrifice anything and everything. Is it so? And if it is so, than we must admit that this novel is surely does not speak for poor but rich man’s grudge, who considers poor as a curse.

In *The White Tiger* Poor and Poverty are presented pejoratively. It is sort of an anti-poor rant. Now it is up to the readers whether they take it as Adiga’s achievement or failure. Poor has become someone who wants to go up in life by hook or crook. The story of Balram asserts, even confirms the judgment of Adiga that every poor is ready to kill his master and put on stake the honour and life of his family if it gives him a chance to live in luxury, which according to Adiga is the ultimate dream and aim of poor. Adiga has completely rejected even exterminate the old concept of Nemesis—no fear for wrongdoing, no motivation for good deeds. The myth of Sisyphus has become quite irrelevant after the birth of Balram. In contrast, Amitav Ghosh has tried his best to bring poetic justice to all characters in *Sea of Poppies*.

The other aspect that distinguishes *Sea of Poppies* from *The White Tiger* is its narrative style. *The White Tiger* has a story, whereas *Sea of Poppies* has a plot. *The White Tiger* has failed to give us any pinprick; plot-thrill is completely missing. *The White Tiger* is built on ‘expectation’ while *Sea of Poppies* on ‘suspense’. Applying E. M. Foster’s criterion to its story *The White Tiger* is a complete failure. Assuming ourselves as Scherazade’s husband, we would have killed our wife on the very first night. There is nothing, which compel us to feel what will happen next. Though the narration of both the novels is seem to

have developed from growth, but as far as *The White Tiger* is concerned this growth seemed artificial. It has a flat monotonous narration without any element of mystery and suspense. We come to know everything about its protagonist Balram in the very first letter, for example, he is poor, he is from village, he has become entrepreneur, and he has killed his master for his red bag full of money. Nothing is left to arrest readers' nerve. Whereas *Sea of Poppies* is a novel, which compels readers to bite their nails and hold their breath on several occasions; such as: Deeti's sati ceremony, her elopement with Kalua, Kalua's humiliation by three thakurs, Deeti's arrest in Dubusa, Kalua's beating by Bharoy Singh, Bharoy Singh's unexpected murder by Kalua, Azad's merciless beating by Subedars, First Mate's murder by Ah Fatt, Fo'cle deck scene. These are few scenes, which are so unpredictable that readers never able to figure out what is going to happen next. Whereas in *The White Tiger* everything seems already heard or seen.

At the same time, the noetic quality of Amitav Ghosh is also superb, whereas Adiga completely lacks it. *The White Tiger* is just a fiction, while *Sea of Poppies* make us acquaintance with the India of 1838. Apart from entertaining, it also enriches our knowledge by taking us back to the era of opium trade, sea-faring, landlord system, British Raj and indentured labourers.

Furthermore, *The White Tiger* rejects Marxist critic Lacás' concept of 'the totality of life'. It alone concentrates on economic aspect of life leaving out other vital aspects of life. Whereas in *Sea of Poppies* Ghosh has tried to break this myth, that alone riches can bring happiness in life. Kalua, Deeti, Paulette, Azad Lascar, Zachery Reid are some strong testimonies of this assertion. They attained their happiness without any riches. Even Neel also found his real happiness after losing all his wealth, in the jail with an unknown foreigner Ah Fatt.

However, Adiga has other advantages. He chose to write on contemporary and almost universal theme of poor and poverty, frustration of modern man. He did not face the danger of overshadowing his subject like Amitav Ghosh. It is indeed very difficult to write a fiction on true historical facts. In most of the cases, history overshadows fiction. Yet Amitav has succeeded in maintaining the balance between the two. This is the big achievement on his part. Its method is that of persuasion rather than proof. In *The White Tiger* Adiga failed to persuade us for Balram's actions. He was not able to make us feel the intense yearning of Balram to break his rooster coop. Most of the reader did not feel sympathetic with him. Whereas in *Sea of Poppies* one naturally feels deep sympathy for Kalua in particular and for Azad, Neel, Deeti, Zachery, Munia, Surzu, Kabutri and Pullet in general.

*The White Tiger* has also failed to give us any memorable character. Balram is a flat character, also a feeble one. The man with the white lips though has some idiosyncrasies but still fails to leave any everlasting impression, other characters like—Pinky madam, Ashok, three landlords, Vijay are only representatives of abstract qualities. However, in *Sea of Poppies* all characters are quite catchy. Who can forget Serang Ali's twisty tongue or Nob Kissin pander's tidbit lingua franca or even Pullet's malapropism? Though here we do not have any protagonist like Balram, but still all the characters in this novel have their own space in which they are leading actors, at the same time none of them face any clash with each other. Yet in *The White Tiger*, Balram is the only lead character, rest of the characters are just functionary used as an abettor in running the main narration.

If we cast a cursory glance on these two artistic pieces, first thing that we notice is that *The White Tiger* has a negative philosophy of life, while *Sea of Poppies* is a multifarious account of most sensitive emotions of mankind. Fiction usually serves either a social or an aesthetic purpose. Unfortunately, *The White Tiger* has failed on both fronts, while *Sea of Poppies* has succeeded on both grounds.



Taking *The White Tiger* as a social document, first I would like to examine its philosophy. *The White Tiger* is an epistolary novel, which deals with the life of Balram Halwai, who becomes a successful entrepreneur. How, that is the novel all about? It presents the degradation of humanity as a compulsory trait of modernization. The message that it gives is that in the present time life has lost its meaning at every level in India, so, consequently an Indian has to indulge in crime or corruption if he wants to be a man or to live like a man. In Arvind Adiga's novel one of the characters, Balram's father, expressed his heartiest desire in these words—"All I want is that one son of mine – at least one – should live like a man" (30). Of course what he meant by "man" is quite different from what Adiga has conveyed to us through his character Balram. No doubt, poverty is a curse. It is very hard to imagine what would be the inspiration for a poor to work and to be in life with all those shut doors of any prospects. It is true that poor cannot dream. And even if he dares, it surely further adds to his disappointment. Adiga was quite honest in his assertion that there are only two ways of going up in life for poor—crime or politics. But in both cases one cannot approve a murder—a killing of a man, not even for once in the whole lifetime. Such approvals are quite dangerous for all human civilization.

Does Adiga really represent the true picture of India? Of course not. Let me first make this clear that words like—corruption, immorality, profligacy, fornication, ribaldry, embezzlement, robbery, deceit, poverty, hypocrisy, buggery, prostitution, rape and murder are not the sole gifts of Indian soil. These words are universal; each country or civilization including China has their share in shame, lesser or greater. Thus, it becomes a moral crime on one's part if he/she assigns these dark practices to one particular race or country, even if he/she is blaming his/her own race/country. Here, Adiga fails as a moral man, so do his protagonist—Balram. I particularly pointed to China because in the novel Adiga has taken her as a model country for development. But the charges of corruption against Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, prove its vulnerability against its projected venerability. Thus, we can conclude that in modern times all nations have same problems. Then why should one blame particular race or country.

If we examine the course of Balram's life, we shall find that his choice of murder is the result of his personal lacking, not a compulsory action out of direct social injustice. First of all, one cannot justify crime in any condition, especially when it is committed for financial gain. Balram was getting three thousand per month from his employer, which is not as bad as to make him a murderer. Secondly, Mr. Ashok never humiliated him in such a manner to bring the real demon out of him. On the contrary, he always trusted him, against all the warning of his family and friends. Of course he did not love him like his son, but who can love his servant like son. Balram also shows his ungratefulness to his own family. Surely, he always wants to escape from rooster coop, but does he ever thought about liberating his brother and other family members from that hell? He killed Mr. Ashok for the money, knowing very well what torture it will bring to his family. He is also ready to kill his nephew Dharam, in case if he will create any trouble for him in future. If this is a definition of being "man", then it is not hard to imagine what this novel inspire us to be. Moreover, what would be the future of our world when we all became so called "man".

This is true that in present times we are having problems in our national character and social beliefs. Criticism without correction is nothing but commercialization of our concealed sores—a stratagem for easy money-making. People who have access to communicating means, bore a responsibility of highest kind. This responsibility cannot be shaken off on any pretext. But Adiga did that on the excuse of presenting reality. In the novel somewhere, Adiga justified his protagonist's misdeeds, and latently motivating millions of poor to adopt his ways of rising up in life. Yet he (Balram) credited all this to his rich master's (Mr. Ashok)

degradation in life. Thus, we can say that this demonic piece of writing is actually serving as a crime-cultivating literature like one of the murder and rape magazines of the novel itself.

Quite the reverse, *Sea of Poppies* has come up as a great relief for humanity. In this novel not only goodness is presented with great enthusiasm but also promoted with sincerity across the racial and national boundaries. Characters like—Kalua (Schedule cast), Zachery Reid (half Negro half American), Poullet (French), Raja Neel Ratan Haldher (high-class Brahmin), Deeti (poor village woman) are few of some which inspire us to retain humanity despite all odds of life. The pure and selfless love of Kalua, Deeti's craftless support to her mates and Munia, noble qualities of Zachery Reid, Neel's genuine sympathy and care for Ah Fatt, Paulette's humble attitude towards Indians are some of the fine flashes of outflowing humanity. This inspirational vitality is completely missing in Adiga's *The White Tiger*. He must have forgotten what a most cunning and corrupt man, Francis Bacon himself had said long time ago in one of his essays, *Of Nature in Men* that "A man's nature runs either to herbs or weeds; therefore let him seasonably water the one, and destroy the other" (54-55). We are made of both good and evil, but the presence of evil does not allow us to be an evil. And even if one does choose to become an evil he/she must not be assigned with a glorious epithet like, "The White Tiger"—the creature that comes along only once in a generation, the rarest of animals. We must not glorify or glamorize negativity in life not even through literature.

No doubt, *The White Tiger* is a novel that deals with one of the harsh truths of Indian society, but the way it is narrated, it failed to create any realistic impression on us. It gives an impression of Indian movies of 1970s with that same hackneyed theme of village man coming to city for job, being corrupted by city-life and finally turning into criminal, eventually realizing the importance of righteousness in life, either submitted to law or dying in repentance. Except that last part of repentance or realization, the rest of the story runs similar to those movies. As far as an Indian reader is concerned, there is nothing new in this story. While reading this novel, Indian readers struggle hard to maintain their interest. Thank God to its moderate length, which helps readers to keep their patience intact?

Another fault that lies with the novel is its unrealistic approach to present reality. It is hard to believe that a cunning criminal like Balram, who is even ready to kill his own nephew Dharam to hide his crime, is sharing his confidential details to Chinese Premier, just to prove his entrepreneurship. Escaping from rich landlords is not an easy task in India. One cannot become carefree after committing such crime, especially if his opponents were rich powerful landlords. We do not even expect Balram to keep written records of his crime, even if he does not post these letters to Mr. Jaibao. The other major fault lies in its treatment of Balram's disturbed psyche. Surely, it can be presented more effectively. Many scenes like—pyre scene, brothel-house scene, gecko fear, beggar child's murder, golden hair fascination, old granny's greed, castle scene can be treated in a better way. These only reflect Adiga's half-backed talent.

The other important drawbacks of its narration is that while writing the novel Adiga himself forgot that he has to convince his readers about its action. There are many occasions when readers are forced to enquire, but only to dissatisfy themselves more. Who can believe that a foreign return couple will converse in Hindi most of the time just to make the things understandable to their driver, so that he can get his real education of life? Similarly, one asks question that how Balram has managed his early life in South with his sole knowledge of Hindi. It is a known fact that in south only English or South-Indian language can save a man from discomfort. In that part of India, Hindi is like an alien language. Nobody can survive with it alone. This issue has not been dealt properly in *The White Tiger*. Because of this lacuna, readers found it difficult to apply Colridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" to this novel. On the contrary, whole time while reading this novel we are forced to believe in Mr.

Johnson's concept that the spectator knows "from the first to the last that the stage is only a stage and that the players are only players".

*The White Tiger* is also guilty of giving wrong information about Hindu religion and Hindu Deities. He has made slanderous mistakes in this novel. First of all there are 33 crores Gods and Goddesses in Hindu religion not 36 million. Second, Gunga is a daughter of Himanchal not of Vedas. She is the elder sister of Parvati. Adiga served his half-backed knowledge of Hindu religion and presented it in the dark light for all the readers of world around. He misinterpreted the relationship of Lord Ram and Hanuman. He has called it a master-servant relationship, and accuses Hindu religion for promoting suppression and subjugation of others. He accuses all Hindu Gods and Goddesses for being idle. His sin is unpardonable. It is a sin on one's part to present something for international analysis without knowing it properly. Only those people, who do not know religion, portray it in dark light. Alone Geeta, one of the holy scriptures of Hindus, can dispel all haze, that is created by Mr. Adiga. One must read this book if he finds Hindu religion anti-humanistic or anti-rationalistic. As far as the relationship of Lord Ram and Hanuman is concerned, it is not of master-slave relationship but of deep love and devotion that is beyond the range of so-called modern man, like Adiga. Religion creates and promotes positive things in life like—respect for duty, obligation, regularity, discipline, sacrifice, altruism, self-control, asceticism etc. Who can raise a question of doubt in these values, only an anti-social? No doubt, some religious customs, rituals and practices are nothing but useless flaunting, and ostentations. However, this alone is not enough to reduce its worth. Religion in all its obscurity and complication will always remain as a source of life and peace in the world. One cannot blame religion for human beings' degradation.

On the surface, though the balance seems lurching towards *Sea of Poppies*, but if pondered deeply one can feel the real worth of *The White Tiger*. *Sea of Poppies* gave us straight expression, while *The White Tiger* has hidden connotations. It queries some deep dark abyss of our time. It asks a question—why should poor behave according to rules and what he gets from his allegiance to this morality. In our own life we have seen many poor who start from *sifur* (naught) and ends on *sifur*, does not matter whether they follow the moral and social codes or not. Very few are able to break their rooster coop. That is why Balram is called 'the white tiger' because he is special in this regard; he actually broke this rooster coop. Now the aporia is that can we justify even a murder for that. No doubt, every man is a murderer in some way or the other, consciously or unconsciously. This way or that way we all participate in their ruin, if not, then we silently connived at their devastation. Only poor know their immeasurable pain and helplessness. Empathy and sympathy will not work here. One cannot deny that this immense agony, grief and helplessness are well enough to choke that vein which supply blood to that part of our brain which makes distinction between good and evil. It was something like expecting mercy from goat for her butcher. Surely if butcher can kill goat and sell her flesh for profit than why a goat cannot kill butcher and free herself for another good chance of life. All the three landlords were guilty of every kind of crime. So why one make fuss if one poor commits a murder against one rich chic. Justification of this action is the real reason behind its success.

In *Sea of Poppies* all the poor including Kalua, Deeti, Azad, Munia, even other minor characters never thought of breaking their rooster coop. Kalua bore no grudge for three thakurs, not even for a second a thought of revenge occurred in his mind; Deeti preferred to be sati than to raise her voice against anyone; Azad also swallowed his part of insult and left Ibis without fighting back; Munia like other poor on Ibis lacks this spirit of breaking that rooster coop. What they want is just to run away from their present. This revolutionary quality of breaking free is only displayed by Balram. That made him special character in twenty first century fiction. That is what made Adiga a special writer—one who had felt the

need to portray a poor with that courage of breaking free. He may legs behind to Amitav Ghosh on technical ground but he outshone him in his courage of taking poor man's side even for his rich master's killing. Here he became an aggressive revolutionary subalternist, who permitted even violent means to ensure their rights.

Apart from this courage, we can also credit him for giving us some striking phrases like—half-baked, country mouse and rooster coop. He also proved himself as subtle casuist. No doubt, murder is a crime and if it is for money then surely a sin. It is very hard to convince reader for a murder in fiction, especially if it is not a part of mystery or thriller. Nevertheless, Adiga has done this, which shows his casuistic talent.

The phantasmagoric technique in *The White Tiger* has excelled the magical realism of *Sea of Poppies*. The buffalo scene is exceptionally pictorial and full of intense macabre. The other one of defecating slum people is quite symbolic of our shameless sullied existence, whereas the vision of Ibis seen by Deeti is unable to thrill us like these images. Balram's unexpiated soul is a true reflection of our modern conscious, whereas Neel's transformation seems quite unrealistic, and of course, the character of Kalua is surely alien for us. In the present time all Kalua have become Balram without a second's delay.

So, what to say, earthly Balrams are fond of fictitious Balram, while alien Kalua struggles hard to gain ground on our beloved Earth. In a line we can conclude— earthly procured award while ethereal secured honour.

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