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The White Tiger: A Study of Moral Recalcitrance

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This is a common belief that a white tiger, also known as white Bengal tiger appears once in a generation. Some zoologists opine that an improper blend of the genes of the white tiger's parents determines the singularity of this predator. Therefore, a white tiger takes birth due to the certain genetic flaw. However, this flaw makes him a versatile predator. It fashions him stronger and more agile than a normal tiger. The white tiger weighs upto 300 kg, and attains a length of about 3 meters. He can outrun the normal tiger even on the soggy land, and can swim quicker in the deep waters. The white tiger is also distinguished for his incredible hearing capacity and curiosity. His farsightedness and stalking are the powerful tools, which make him singular among the tigers. These traits help him in tracking and hunting the prey even in the dark. Like other tigers, the white tiger is a solitary animal, and likes the solitude very much. Therefore, it allows this large predator to sneak up on the prey more effectively in the dense jungle. Similarly, Balram, Adiga's *White Tiger* imitates some traits of the white Bengal tiger. Like the predator, he also loves solitude. Similarly, he is gifted with incredible listening power. Balram is very agile and quickly reads the next move of his prey. He is born of the rickshaw driver who wanted to split off the shackles of slavery and poverty, but he could not collect courage to rebel against the social vices. Finally, he got victim to the corrupt social system. He became a victim of feudalism, illiteracy and subjection to the rotten codes of morality. Now, he wishes thus: "All I want is that one son of mine –at least one should live like a man"¹(30). Balram Halwai, *The White Tiger* inherits "the will to live like a man"¹(30) from his father. This 'spirit' excludes him from other people of the society, who are slave of their fate. Some critics observe this trait of Balram as a genetic flaw representing the pedigree, but it makes him a man among the slaves; it makes him *The White Tiger* among the weak willed human animals. This is the selfsame trait, which earned Adiga, Booker Prize in 2008 for the caption novel, the bestseller *The White Tiger*.

In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai plays a versatile character. He commences his journey in the novel as a nursery school kid. He enacts several roles such as a "human spider" at the tea stall, a car driver of a landlord-cum-coal thief, the Stork, the homemaker and ends his journey as the big entrepreneur. Adiga portrays the protagonist as the man who does not succumb to the herd mentality. He explores a unique species in Balram, which made him distinct from the village herd. He attempts to revive Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in Balram, who is free spirited and never yields to the herd mentality; who is released from the chains of traditions and ideology; who breaks the rusted codes of the society and creates new values with a sense of uniqueness and passion for life. The present paper is an attempt to portray Balram as a moral recalcitrant.

The term *recalcitrant* is derived from Latin word *recalcitrans*, present participle of *recalcitare*, which is made of two terms *re-* + *calcitare*, where *re* stands for *back* and *calcitare* for *kick*. Then, *recalcitare* means *kick back*, and *recalcitrans*, a person who is a rebel and obstinately defiant of authority. In the novel *The White Tiger*, Balram is a recalcitrant in a true sense because he does not bear with the wrongs inflicted on him or others. He raises voice

against the inflictors and teaches them a tough lesson. He believes in the Nietzschean ideology to live life like a man. He opines that the only way to escape “the Darkness” is to become tinged by its dubious morality lowering one’s self to the level of one’s surrounding. He furthers that one cannot become successful in such a corrupt system without becoming as corrupt as the system itself. In this context, Balram narrates that at school, he always evaded the punishment of his teacher, while other students couldn’t do so. He believes that laziness begets problems at large, apart from the corruption. When the shopkeeper reproaches him for failing to sincerely play “human spider” and eavesdropping the customers, Balram quits the job, but does not allow the former to screw his free spirit.

Balram grieves over the fate of the “half-baked” citizens. He bears hatred against those who have crippled the economy of the nation and paralyzed the citizens. It perturbs him to learn that a handful of the corrupt people have impoverished the nation. In addition, the people are too terrified to raise voice against these blacksheep. Adiga is of the opinion that poison kills poison; so a predator like the white tiger can destroy these devils. In the novel, he addresses such corrupt people as the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Raven and the Buffalo. He exposes cruelty of the Stork. This devil owns the river that flows outside of Laxmangarh, Balram’s village. The devil claims to be owner of the river; therefore, he levies charges on everyone who catches the fish, and on the boatman who ferries between the villages. The novelist expresses fatal greediness of the Stork’s brother who is presented as the Wild Boar. This devil owns “all the good agricultural land” of the village. He forces whoever approaches him for a piece of land to plough, bow down to his feet and touch “the dust under his slippers”¹. The novelist grievously introduces the third devil brother of the Stork, defamed as the Raven. This human animal is the cruelest of the all. He claims to be owner of the coal area and the barren land. He collects tax from the herdsmen if they graze their cattle on this unfertile land. This devil steals the coal from the public coalmines, and the government observes this loot silently. This is because he zips the mouths of the corrupt officials with bribery. The fourth devil brother of the Stork is known as the Buffalo; because like the animal, he rams through whoever comes on the roads. He claims to be owner of the roads; therefore, everyone who uses the road for transport is liable to pay him the roadtax. Adiga depicts the picture of 21st century India. It aches his heart that when the nation claims herself to be the rising economy of the world. However, in reality, this country still portrays an image of the enslaved India. Adiga feels sorry for the people who are born in poverty, and always cling to it all through their life. They never venture to come out of this dungeon and live like a man of self-respect. It anguishes him to think over that:

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent –as strong, as talented, as intelligent in everyway –to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man’s hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse¹(176).

This is because the novelist begets the white tiger, who, he firmly believes, could roar away fear and servile mentality from the villagers. He also gets sure that his tiger would roar the corrupt people to leave the wrong way; if they not, would put them to the terrible end.

When Balram ponders over casteism, it anguishes him lot. He wonders that it is still prevalent in the postmodern India. He wishes the selfsame must be uprooted anyhow at the earliest. He takes initiative and breaks the code –the Halwai community is not destined for only

making sweets; they can choose their profession as per the skill or interest. Balram doesn't perpetuate his clan work; instead he chooses to learn driving the car. The car trainer also pinches the protagonist satirizing that driving is meant for the aggressive and brave people, while the Halwai are the softhearted and peace loving species. When Balram lures the trainer for bonus, the latter agrees. Thus, Balram breaks the family code, adopts another profession, and establishes himself as an active social activist and iconoclast. He strongly condemns the social dogmas, and breaks them. When his granny, Kusum compels him for marriage, he turns down the proposal. Then she tortures him with moral fear: if he doesn't marry, the whole village will suffer draught. It will not rain in the village. She shares a dogma about marriage: "any disease of body or mind gets cured when you penetrate a virgin"¹(193). This is not enough. She attempts to horrify Balram giving another example of blasphemy. She warns him if he does not believe in the family gods, and dares to profane the moral codes, he would meet some deadly consequence. She adds further that a man of the village "stopped believing in God", "His buffalo died at once"¹(186). However, the protagonist does not worry for these baseless things, and moves ahead in quest of identity and self-respect.

Balram exposes several vices of the society, whereof the most horrible are dowry and corruption. It grieves him to note that the dowry is still rampant in the modern India. He strongly condemns it, opposes it and denies his granny to marry him for dowry. This annoys him to know that he could not stop the granny from screwing "the girl's family"¹ in his brother, Kishan's marriage:

It was one of the good marriages. We had the boy, and we screwed the girl's family hard. I remember exactly what we got in Dowry... five thousand rupees in cash, all crisp new unsoiled notes fresh from the bank, plus a Hero bicycle plus a thick gold necklace for Kishan ¹(51).

The protagonist blames this practice because of that he had to leave his schooling, and was forced to work as a "human creeper" at the tea stall of the landlord, the Stork. The granny borrowed big loan from the landlord for the marriage of her granddaughter. Against the loan, Balram and his brother, and all young male members were pawned to work for the Stork. Here, the protagonist draws the attention that the life of the youth is put on stake; sometimes it is screwed severely just for the sake of the false dignity. One more, the olden adage looks appropriate in this regard that a person should stretch his legs as long as the quilt is. If one forgets it, the day is not far away when one would tear one's quilt. The same happened with the family of the granny; she put in jeopardy the life of Balram and other young males, and caused a fatal end of the family.

This is very heart piercing that a head master of the primary school justifies the burglary of the resources provided by the government for the students. He confesses the crime that he sold out the uniforms on low price in "the neighboring village"¹(33). He defends himself saying that he was forced to commit this crime because "he hadn't been paid his salary in six month"¹(33). Balram next exposes corruption of the government hospitals. It upsets him when he recalls the shameful picture of the district hospital. He flashes back carrying his sick father to this hospital. There he finds the patients lying on the filthy floors and waiting for the doctors. One patient was crying as the blood was oozing from his wounded leg. The father of the protagonist himself was puking the blood because tuberculosis had consumed him nearly all. No doctor came, the father

died in his lap. This incident badly shakes the protagonist and he decides to split off the shackles of poverty. Balram is so disappointed on the misery of the poor that he believes: “To live under some cement bridge, begging for their food and without hope for future. That is not much better than being dead”¹(314-315). He has hatred against those people who are stuck to the poverty; they do not dare to come out of it because they fear the risk. It is noted “Balram is the conscience of underclass –their anger, frustration, protest and revenge, ready to adopt a new moral code of conduct to succeed in life”³ (Chopra).

It is the first step taken by Balram against financial slavery that he murders his master. He argues that he was so much disgusted of the life of a slave that he did not feel guilty of killing Ashok, the master. He kills the master for he wanted to experience just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it meant not to be a servant. Balram admits the retributive change in himself because the selfsame change happened in his master first. The protagonist feels sad and says his master was innocent when he came back from America but “life in Delhi corrupted him –and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent”¹ (197). The protagonist here reviews the lives of the thousands of the villagers who were victimized by the devilish change in these landlords and their pinions. They looted the natural resources and threw the people in the poverty. He thinks these devils deserve the severe punishment. Balram knows that he cannot fight against the demons. Therefore, he plans to acquire some skill, and then earn the money and finally waits for the proper time to put them in hell. It is a mere coincidence or a plan that Balram chooses to be driver of the big tormentor who spoiled his life and so many young people of the district. First, he wins the confidence of all members of the Stork family, and then he removes the other driver from his way and finally grabs the opportunity to control the life of Ashok, the elder son of the Stork, the tormentor and exploiter of the natural resources and human lives.

Before Balram conspires to kill his master, he thinks a lot about the retribution of the Stork. He knows the landlord would slaughter all members of his family. Nevertheless, he decides to kill the master. Thereupon, he argues, “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” (176-177). He wants to liberate from “the rooster coop”¹(631). He compares the landlords of Laxmangarh with the butchers. As a butcher thrusts many birds in a cage, and lays one of them slain on it in order to terrify the rest; similarly these landlords horrify the poor villagers. They threaten to kill all the relatives, if any of their slaves dare revolt against their tyranny. The butcher keeps one bird slaughtered on the coop, the rest birds silently watch their brother fluttering to death, and its parts scattered all over, but they together don’t attempt to break the cage : “ The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they’re net. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop”¹(174). This situation of the birds perturbs the protagonist. He thinks every bird knows the next is his or her turn to be slain, then why none opposes. Adiga is of the opinion that it is better to die opposing the wrong than be killed. This impresses the protagonist much and he decides not to yield to death slavishly. He resolves to face death in an encounter with the devil. He makes it sure that he won’t see himself as one of the caged birds helpless and servile in the rooster coop. He finds himself as the rebellious incarnation of Velutha. He resolves that like Velutha, he cannot meekly suffer the wrongs of the tyrants. However, he regrets knowing that Velutha being a versatile leads a life of a slave. In *God of The Small Things*, the novelist portrays him as, “He

looked after the plumbing and all the electrical gadgets in the house ⁵(Roy,75). Velutha is not respected in the society. He is an untouchable. Apart from, this is quite daring that he loves a woman of the high society and doesn't care for the terrible end. Like Balram, he dares not to stand for social equality. He doesn't work for his liberty and self respect. Equally, Balram is a versatile. "He can read and write, but he doesn't get what he's read. He is half-baked. The country is full of people like him, I will tell you that. And we entrust over glorious parliamentary documentary"¹(10), even though he does not get the respect in the society. He is not valued for what he is as a skilled person. He is looked down upon for he is by caste. Adiga grieves over untouchability, a social canker still available in 21st century India: "It is ironical that in a postcolonial world, man's identity is formulated not on the basis of his skills but on the basis of his skin"⁴(Mishra). Unlike Velutha, Balram oversteps the barriers which the conventions of his superiors had built up to protect their own weaknesses against him. Adiga finds logic in what a great Indian writer comments: "He (Velutha) could not invade the magic circle which protects a priest from attack by anybody, especially by a low caste man. So in the highest moment of his strength, the slave in him arrested itself, and he lapsed back, wild with torture, biting his lips, ruminating his grievances"²(Anand,73). However, Balram invades the magic circle and exposes the false virtues of the hypocrites like the Stork and his evil brothers.

Under the facts observed in the present paper, Balram deserves to be called as a recalcitrant. It is true that "Balram is the conscience of underclass –their anger, frustration, protest and revenge, ready to adopt a new moral code of conduct to succeed in life"³ (Chopra). He is a composite of various men whom a person meets, listens to and talks to while travelling through different parts of the country. He is the genius whom one would hear on the door if any gadget or taps or other homely appliances need to be repaired. Thus he can feed himself and his dependents peacefully leading a servile life. The question perturbs the readers why he kills his caring master. Above all, Balram kills his master not just for money, but for the values, a human being wants from other human being. He believes that a person cannot live just by the physical facilities if he is not treated as a human being. Balram was treated like a slave. He was insulted by his master and mistress, and other members of the Stork's family. He sends a message to the masters by his treatment with his own servants. He never says they are his slaves, but the helpers. He does not even treat them as family members, but like the helpers. He himself affirms it:

I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. I don't treat them like servants –I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling them my 'family' either. They are my employees; I am their boss, that's all. I make them sign it too, and both of us must honour that contract. That's all"¹(302).

Hence, Balram does not show any sympathy towards his employees. He expects them to do their duty sincerely, and he himself is committed to observe his responsibility with honesty. He himself says, "When the work is done I kick them out of the office: no chitchat, no cups of coffee. A white tiger keeps no friends. It is too dangerous"¹ (302). This way, he advises the masters to not befriend with their servants. He believes that if Ashok had not made Balram his friend, and trusted upon him blindly, he would have evaded his death. However, Balram defines himself once again as a white tiger different from other species, and tiger makes no friend. He makes it clear he is a tiger, not a habitual predator. He does not believe in adopting the way of terrorism to grow up a big man. He is never heard about he has killed a single soul thereafter. He invests the booty and begins a new and respectful life. He plays the white tiger to make the rich

realize that they are not safe; they will meet their fatal end if they exploit the poor. Since, there is tiger in every tormented poor man. He finally appeals the rich not to wake up this wounded predator; otherwise, the day is not away, when he would destroy their evil empire.

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