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Slanted Honesty in *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

The World is moving fast and the growth of an individual or a nation is valued in terms of money, economy, trade, science, political power and materiality whereas social, cultural, moral and spiritual values are being sidelined in this modern world. The paper attempts to explore such slanted morality occurred in the novel *The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga and tries to present Adiga as a realist with a notion of social emancipation and liberation.

Keywords: Slanted, Morality, Postcolonial, modernity, individualism, values.

Arvind Adiga, a journalist by profession and a novelist by passion, won the Man Booker Prize for his debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) for delineating the darkest and negative side of this country like V S Naipaul's travelogue *Area of Darkness* (1964) highlighting degraded morals replacing the intact age-old moral values in postcolonial globalized society. Everything is falling apart in the globalized world where India is not an exception. The world is growing fast where the growth of nations is valued in terms of economy, science, trade and political power. The social, cultural, spiritual and moral values are being sidelined for material prosperity of life. The novel explores how money liberates people easily but it destroys families, marriages and everything.

Morality reflects a person's sense of right and wrong or what 'ought' to be. The novel explores malpractices, corruption, prostitution, murder, criminal acts, injustice, etc. in postcolonial India. India is the land of Buddha and Gandhi where one observes a rich heritage and traditional moral values of the incredible India, but these things are being shattered under the progress of civilization or the so-called modernity although one boasts that "*We live in a glorious land. The Lord Buddha received his enlightenment in this land. The river Ganga gives life to our plants and animals and our people. We are grateful to God that we were born in this land.*" (Adiga, A. *White*.P. 34.).

The novel is a social commentary on the Indian society. Balram is the protagonist of the novel who is born in a fictional remote village Laxmangarh in Bihar and journeyed to Delhi, the capital of India through difficulties of his life to support his family. He becomes a trained driver

of Ashok Sharma. Balram becomes totally a changed person from an innocent, rustic village person to completely greedy, selfish and above all a person with crime. This moral devaluation entraps him and a kind of loss happens in him with the corrupted influence of Delhi city and its corrupted '*fucked-up system called parliamentary democracy.*' (Adiga, A. *White*.P. 156.). The moral decadence and the loss can be found in the following lines:

I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness. All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him – and once the master of the Honda city becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent? (Adiga, A. *White*.P. 197.).

Adiga presents corrupt systems of India and changed perceptions of people with degraded morality in a very realistic way. He represents 'India of Darkness' and 'India of Light' both are equally unjust and corrupt. He satirizes both the poor and the rich. Adiga's satire on India is so keen, that he denies the existence of castes in India and claims only two classes – the poor and the rich, 'Big bellied men' and 'Small bellied men'. In his words –

In the olden days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies.
And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up.
(Adiga, A. *White*.P. 64.).

Corruption is the indispensable part of India and criminalization of politics has become a part of democracy through corruption. Elections, casting votes without conscience are common in the country. Urban corruption is scathingly attacked by Adiga. He portrays how politicians and bureaucrats take bribe. Ashok, the landlord's elder son, is asked by his father to drop the bags of money to politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay and Balram himself is involved in bartering for girls, drinking single malt whisky and play key role in all these malpractices. All corrupt practices are done under a picture of Mahatma Gandhi or holy picture of innumerable goddesses. An instance of this dark world of corruption is depicted thus:

Every day, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffeur is driving an empty car with a black suitcase on the backseat. Inside that suitcase is a million, two million rupees; more money than that chauffeur will see in his lifetime. If he took the money he could go to America, Australia, anywhere and start new life. He could go

inside the five star hotels he has dreamed about all his life and only seen from the outside. He could take his family Goa to England. Yet he takes that black suitcase where his master wants. He puts it down where he is meant to, and never touches a rupee. Why?(Adiga, A. *White*. P. 174).

Balram has to do all menial jobs like massaging Mongoose, (symbolically addressed to Mukesh, the brother of Ashok, Landlord's son), carry cash to ministers and politicians, bring liquor and women for men, and entertain people by serving liquor. He was exploited in many ways as a driver –cum- servant. He is also blackmailed when Pinky madam (Ashok's wife) kills a man on the road in the drunken driving state. He has to suffer humiliation in the hands of his master. He was forced to sign a statement of accepting the full responsibility for the accident:

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

I, BalramHalwai, son of VikramHalwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya do make the following statement on my own free will and intention:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person or persons, or person and object, on the night of January 23rd this year... I swear by almighty god that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one. (Adiga, A. *White*. P.168.).

Balram was also rewarded when Pinky madam left Ashok suddenly in a rage because Balram had driven her to the airport in the middle of the night for which he got brown envelope filled with forty-seven hundred rupees as a tip. He spends that money on prostitutes.

Prostitution is one of the dark features of India portrayed in the novel. In the urban India like Delhi, Bangalore, Dhanbad women are forced to this profession due to poverty. The rich people of Delhi prefer 'golden haired woman' (Adiga, A. *White*. P.232.) and the cost depends on 'high-class or low-class? Virgin or non-virgin?' (Adiga, A. *White*. P.227.). The suppliers of women bring dyed golden hair to get maximum price and the poverty stricken poor laborers, Nepali girls and Ukrainian students are exploited and forced into this profession. Balram imitates his master and becomes the master like servant. He finds his master enjoying life with girls or prostitutes. So, he becomes pragmatic in regard of independence, individualism and self-reliance disregarding any morality. He goes very close to the philosophy of his master Ashok's Machiavellianism who deceives and manipulates others for personal gain.

Balam while becoming like his master, could not keep his honesty intact. His social philosophy or ambition makes him a murderer to become an entrepreneur. He murders his master Mr. Ashok for the sake of money.

I could gloat that I am not just any murderer but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father) and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer.(Adiga, A. *White*. P.45).

The White Tiger has also mocked at how people changed their name, religion and their identity to become rich disregarding values, ethics as Balram establishes himself as a successful entrepreneur with seven lakh rupees that he has stolen from his master after killing him. Now, he calls himself Ashok Sharma and becomes the owner of a taxi company.

The quality like honesty has no value in the globalized world. Everything is 'money'. Money is highly valued as Balram, after establishing himself as an entrepreneur, his taxi hits a cyclist but he manages the case by bribing the police in a dishonest way. Adiga openly talks about corruption in India and takes a complete advantage of freedom of speech.

A man on a bicycle getting killed - the police don't even have to register the case. A man on a motorbike getting killed - they would *have* to register that. A man in a *car* getting killed - they would have thrown me in jail. (Adiga, A. *White*. P.309).

Balam also gives tips to other drivers to earn little extra cash by cheating as he did to his master by acts like to siphon petrol, to take his master's car to a corrupt mechanic who billed him for work that was not necessary, to pick up a paying customers etc. He also urges all the servant class to revolt and break the 'Rooster Coop' without thinking of morality and set values. He reminds the poor that their condition is wretched because of their goodness and the base of whole Indian economy is trustworthiness of servants. The novel also gives the message through the protagonist that to become successful, one needs to be morally corrupt, cheat others, murder and make crimes although the motive of Adiga is self-examination rather than criticism as he stated :

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... criticism by writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens in the 19th century helped England and France to become better societies. That's why I am trying to do... It is not an attack on the country, It's about the greater

process of self-examination.(Adiga, Interview to Guardian, Oct, 16th 2008).

Conclusion:

Being a Marxist, Adiga gives the message that one has to liberate from being poor and slave whatever may be the means. Liberation is rewarded at the end by him. His protagonist follows no morality and still he wins sympathy from the readers as a hero of underclass. No matter what his way of thinking is, he brings change or 'complete revolution' by violence as the way Marx wanted for the proletarians. Adiga successfully portrayed the picture of present India with slanted honesty and makes the reader to ponder about the present scenario.

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