

The White Tiger: A Novel with Paradox & Irony

Dr. Ashish Gupta

Professor & Head

Department of English

Government Girls College

Betul (M.P.), India

Email id- gupta.sharpcool@gmail.com

ORCID id- 0000-0003-4916-2601

Abstract

The White Tiger is an epistolary novel in seven parts with shocking fictional narrative. The protagonist Balram is an anti-hero, cleverly escapes from his crime; his innocence gone with the taste of fugitive life and become a criminal; boosted never to be catch by police. Balram's journey starts from Laxmangarh to Delhi and to Bangalore. The writer presents a riveting tale of the realistic anti-hero Balram Halwai, who although born in the most humble surrounding, ambitions to rise above his predetermined fate to be born and die in "the darkness" and achieves it through his ruthless planning of the murder of his master Ashok. Balrams' ascend represents subalterns' progress in post colonial world; it is a protest that no bigotry any more is tolerable. He broke '*the Rooster Coop*' and became *The White Tiger*. Balram's acts are the product of age old resentment of marginalised generations; exhibit revenge therapy. This work advocates wild justice. This novel is well stuffed with paradox and irony.

Keywords- Fugitive, Subaltern, Corruption, Post Colonial, Wild Justice, Paradox, Irony

Aravind Adiga, an Indian born, Australian educated writer, shot to fame with his very first work *The White Tiger*, which went on to win the Man Booker prize in 2008.. After Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai he becomes the fourth Indian born author to win this prize. In this novel we can find a humorous perspective of class struggle in Indian society. It is not merely a novel but it examines some serious issues like poverty, religion, caste and corruption in India. The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of the Hindu religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately, Balram transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service.

The present novel is an epistolary novel which means that it was written in a letter form to Wen Jiabo. Balram Halwai is the protagonist of this novel who symbolically stands for the entrepreneurs of modern India. The story has been narrated by him in over seven days and nights. This story can also be seen as his journey from darkness to light. As an entrepreneur Balram wants to keep in touch with Wen Jiabo who is a Chinese premier who wants to understand entrepreneurship in

India. The setting of the novel is at Laxmangarh which acts like a sample village for Adiga. *The White Tiger* is a socio-political fiction, exposes the naked reality of modern India. Balram's journey starts from Laxmangarh (Gaya district, Bihar) to Delhi and to Bangalore. Balram's parents were poor, His mother was ill and died, his father was a rickshaw puller struggling on roads to earn, he also died of tuberculosis in government hospital. They had no time to name him so, he is called 'Munna' means a boy; his school teacher gave him name 'Balram' belong to Halwai family. Let's see first day conversations between Balram and his teacher in the school -

"Munna? That's not a real name.

He was right; It just means 'boy'

That's all I have never been given a name.

Did not your mother name you?

She is very ill, sir, she lies in bed and spews, blood.

She got no time name me?

And your father?

He's rickshaw puller, sir, He has got no time to name. (*The White Tiger* 13)

Here villagers are tormented and exploited by the landlord. Corruption has also not spared prestigious institutions like school. Few lines from the novel are interesting to quote here- "That was supposed to be free food at my school- a government programme gave every boy three rotis, yellow dal, and pickles and everyone knew why: the school teacher had stolen our lunch money....once, a truck came into the school with information that the government had sent for us; we never saw them, but a week later they turned up for sale in the neighboring village" (*The White Tiger* 33). In school, the inspection officer asked some question to Balram and he answered correctly so, he gave him another name 'The White Tiger - born alone once in every generation'. (*The White Tiger* 35) But the process of real education for 'The White Tiger' starts when he is forced to work along with his brother in the village tea shop to pay off family debts. The family has taken a big loan from the stork so they could have a lavish wedding and a dowry for their cousin sister. He becomes a target for other boys when they repeat the inspector's words and laugh boisterously. Neither any insult nor humiliation could dampen the spirits of Balram who is determined to break the cages. Because of loan taken to give dowry in Reena's (cousin) marriage, his schooling ceased and his practical erudition started from tea shop to driver-cum-cook-cum-servant then after slitting his master Mr. Ashok, snatched red bag with 700,000 rupees and became successful business tycoon of Bangalore; he calls himself Ashok Sharma.

Adiga highlighted both sides, '*India in light*' and '*India in darkness*', Balram is a link between two worlds. '*India in Light*' includes Mall culture, Fugitive life, Industries, Fully equipped School and Colleges, IT sector, Posh and well constructed apartments, Hotel and Tourism, Political and Judicial tie ups, Slums, Red light area, Call centres, Transportations, Prostitutes, Taxi services, Murder weekly magazines. While '*India in Darkness*' consists Poverty, Landless labourers, Zamindari and Dowry practice, Illiterate and Unemployed youth, Joint families, Child labourer, Half-baked Indians etc. Adiga has tried to draw a distinct line between darkness and light. When Balram is in in Laxmangarh he is residing in darkness, but in Bangalore and Delhi he comes to Light. Everything is supposed to be perfect just like 'mini-America', with its big hotels, cloud reaching buildings, call centers, malls, high tech areas indeed "A small bit of America in India" (*The White Tiger* 204). But Adiga's own description of the city diminishes the thin line between the two. As he consciously begins to try to find his self identity and the justifications for his future heinous action, he

stumbles upon a slum in Delhi and finds himself facing a line of men defecating, trying to construct a wall between darkness and light.

Adiga explores that '*India in Darkness*' is the base of '*India in Light*' but is fully neglected. Although, India is progressing economically but nobody cares for the base of it - the labourers foremost resource for success; the makers of modern India whose hands build the roads, Posh apartments, Malls, Schools, Colleges, Industries, Trade, Agriculture, Infrastructure. It is a fact that only 'Darkness fetches light in the world'. Valley of Rich and Poor is widening rapidly. It's a tragedy that rich person could come, hit and run their children, even there is no FIR in any police station of this murder. Nobody have a time to think about their welfare. Within the Shinning India there dwells deep darkness. In Rural India Landlord practise squeezed poor's blood and in Urban India corruption swollen development. There are four Landlord in Laxmangarh, each have got his name from the peculiarities of their appetite, 'The Stork' owned the village river; fisherman and boatman are charged by him. His brother 'Wild Boar' owned agricultural land, peasants are in trouble, compelled to swallow his day wages and he keeps bad eye on their women. 'The Raven' owned the dry, rock hillside land who charged for grazing goatherd. If they didn't pay him, he likes to molest their women. 'The Buffalo' was the greediest of all owned roads, Rickshaw puller had to pay him one third of their earning. All four Animals lived in high walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh (the landlords' quarters); had their own temples inside the mansions; their own wells and ponds; did not need to come out into the village except to feed.

Adiga faithfully presented the poignant state of poor. Balram is the mouthpiece of Adiga, he says, 'A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different. My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle cured around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hip bones into his buttocks. The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen' (*The White Tiger* 26-27). Adiga condemns Indian social and political system and ironically. There is open dealing between the teashop owner, under whom Balram and other were working and the great socialist party for making vote bank. Balram and other members working in teashop are made eighteen to increase the number of votes to the great socialist's party. Same is the condition of his cousin Kishan, the family is squeezing his body to feed them. The mutton curry prepared by Kusum (his granny) seems like Kishan's blood and Balram in anger refuses to have it. Condition of village in India is pathetic; Balram witnessed poor education and healthcare system in Laxmangarh. In school his teacher sleeps in noon, in the class; whole class was spotted with red paans spit; he sells the uniform of children allotted by government and gives an excuse that there is no payment from six month. There is no Doctor in Government Hospital; Doctors are busy in private practice. Hospital is not safe for poor because cat has tasted human blood, scarcity of bed, patients squatted on the floor, on newspaper, some with open wounds, some are coughing of tuberculosis.

Adiga displays that Drivers have bad name inflicted to this profession, without drinking and prostitution, it is incomplete. When Balram learned driving from his master (old driver); he taught him that a driver must possess a particular attitude while driving which included abusing also, '*roar like a tiger on road*'. He said, 'The road is a jungle, get it? A good driver must roar ahead on it.' (*The White Tiger* 57) When he learned driving with his hard-work and determination, old driver said 'You are surprise package, little fellow', 'I have a reward for you' they walked to dark area of Laxmangarh and for the first time, he tasted woman and drink. Then, he said now you become a complete driver. Prostitution is one aspect of poverty; poverty, loneliness, illiteracy compel women to adopt

prostitution, live in red light areas. Prostitute's condition is same everywhere, the only difference is that, in village they demand in hundreds and in city they demand in thousands. Balram says worst part of being a driver is that, 'you have hours to yourself while waiting for your employer. You can spend this time chit-chatting and scratching your groin. You can read murder and rape magazines. You can develop the chauffeur's habit – it's a kind of yoga, really – of putting a finger in your nose and letting your mind go blank for hours (they should call it the 'bored driver's asana'). You can sneak a bottle of Indian liquor into the car – boredom makes drunks of so many honest drivers. But if the driver sees his free time as an opportunity, if he uses it to think, then the worst part of his job becomes the best' (*The White Tiger* 149).

Adiga clearly shows through Balram's journey from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad then Delhi and finally to Bangalore that the socio-psychological condition of the underclass remains unchanged. Although the cities provide ample opportunities of job but still social behaviour and psyche of the upper class is identical everywhere whether it is a landlord or politician, bureaucrat, rich man, upper caste people, industrialist or entrepreneur. Everywhere these downtrodden are trapped in Rooster Coop struggling to come out of the cage. Even though we have modern thought but it is still unmatched with the West thinking. Mr. Ashok is unable to convince Pinky, his wife, an American to stay in India and she left India secretly, finally their marriage is on the edge of divorce. All men are fixed to their root and if they try to uproot it to observe in another root they will feel alienated. Same thing happen with Ashok and Pinky both were unable to cope up with each other's culture and got separated. Pinky left because she doesn't like Indian way of thinking, doing things and she also has a guilt feeling of killing a child while driving in a drunken state.

Hunger and Poverty is a root cause for all crime. Every second child of the poor becomes Balram. Balram is a Halwai destined to make sweets but he rebels against his fate and choose to become a driver. Balram starts his job from 800–1500–4000 as driver-cum-cook-cum-servant. Again he determined not to be a driver or servant anymore and becomes owner of an outsource business to America, provides Taxi service to call centre employees; owned 26 Toyota Qualises and 16 employees under him. Balram justify his act of killing Mr. Ashok without the trace of guilt feeling, he says although Mr. Ashok is a good man but he has a blood of landlords. Mr. Ashok was silent when Stork and Moongoose (Mukesh) was preparing to put him in jail on behalf of Pinky Madam's crime, killed a child while driving. They compelled Balram to take blame on his head and sacrifice his life for them. Further, he says when Mr. Ashok came from America, he was innocent but Delhi's fugitive life corrupted his soul. After Pinky Madam's departure Mr. Ashok was in trauma but his brother boosted him to get another wife, but this time an Indian Hindu girl. He started dating Uma his ex-lover to avoid loneliness and prostitutes also. So, Balram also opted corrupt ways in the company of other dishonest driver; he also started going for prostitutes specially fascinated for golden hair girl as Mr. Ashok do. He became greedy to earn extra money, without hesitation, he cheats his master by 'Siphon petrol from the car, with the funnel and set it; if car repairing is needed, go to corrupt mechanic and inflate repairing price; encash his master's ignorance by selling empty whisky bottles to the bootleggers; three times while driving back to Buckingham B, he picked up a paying customer' (*The White Tiger* 230).

Balram is replica of Mr. Ashok, only think make a difference is, Mr. Ashok was weak unable to break 'the Rooster Coop' and Balram was succeeded in it. The philosophy behind that is, 'Life is a jungle if one small animal want to survive he should learn to kill the big one, otherwise ready to die'. A primary motive of Adiga while writing his masterpiece seems to be to bring forth the unbridled corruption and confront the society of servitude existing in our country. And he seems to have

succeeded remarkably through the exquisite and almost unique employment of animal imagery. Balram views the whole nation as a kind of zoo, in which everyone has his own boundaries and limitations. Eventually it were these boundaries which kept our nation civilized, but with the dawn of independence these boundaries were pulled down, as according to him in 1947 when the Britishers left “only a moron would think that we became free then”. Our nation did not become independent but became a jungle - - “See this country, in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation was like a zoo. ... And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on fifteenth of August 1947, the day the Britishers left- the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law”. (*The White Tiger* 63) Old India is shackled in caste and religion. Stork asks Balram directly – ‘Are you from a top caste or bottom caste, boy?’ (*The White Tiger* 64) There is still Hindu-Muslim divide, because of this, many people doesn’t get good job; doesn’t live peacefully and even compel to hide their caste than to starve their family in poverty. Mohammad the poor Muslim disguised as Ram Parsad, an old driver in Stork’s house but left the job when revealed to Balram. In Old India there were one thousand castes but Modern India believes in two castes: ‘Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destines: eat – or get eaten up’ (*The White Tiger* 64). The big fish of pond will eat the small; it is an inevitable rule of survival.

Adiga observed that corrupt ways of Political and Bureaucracy swollen India. Mr. Ashok says, ‘Most of Politicians are half baked. That’s the whole tragedy of this country.’ (*The White Tiger* 10) Kiran Desai also makes hard hitting attack on the corrupt political system in India. ‘Not one truthful politician in the whole country. Yes, our parliament is made of thieves, each one answerable to the prime minister, who is the biggest thief of them all’. (*Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* 20) Further, Adiga says that we are lagging behind china “because of this Fucked up system call parliamentary democracy. Otherwise, we’d be just like China” (156). “The Partition of India”, according to Desai is “the result of wrong policies of our Government, which she calls the first heart attack to our country. . . that has never been healed” (*Inheritance of Loss*, 129). Balram assures Chinese Premier about Indian’s honesty, ‘Because Indians are the world’s most honest people like the prime minister’s Booklet will inform you? No, It’s because 99.9 per cent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market’ (*The White Tiger* 174-175). Then he explains ‘Why does the Rooster Coop Work? – the Indian family, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop.’ . . . and Can a man break out of the coop? – Only the 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. It would, in fact, take a White Tiger’ (*The White Tiger* 176-177). This work has well stuffed with irony and paradoxes. Poor is starving for food and rich is dieting, exercising to maintain their figure; like to be poor, lean and thin body. It is human tendency to curve for other’s fate; nobody is satisfied with their present situation. Human being suffers due to his wishes, ‘he is a slave of his own desires’. Money minded Rich people spent lot of money in shopping malls, readily ransom millions of rupees to minister’s for tax exemption but if their single penny will not seen in their pocket they will blame their servant to be dishonest. Prostitutes sell their body to escape from starvation and rich purchased them for their pleasure. Rich assures servant’s honesty only when he is ready to scarify himself for his master’s welfare.

Adiga through this novel, emphasises that before go forward Indian government should search country’s dark areas, analysis it, make a faithful research, in every sphere of it, make the recoveries in it than only genuine development of the whole country is possible. In fact, it’s not the work of one or two days but, if every government will work faithfully towards the progress of the

country and within 10-20 years change will be visible. This novel made an enquiry that, Who is the creator of these criminals? Who germinated the seed of resentment? Who provoked the humble person to choose the path of crime? - We and our society are responsible for creating criminals. From village, poor people come in search of work and become the victim of inhuman, partial, prejudiced, biased, humiliation, insult, unequal behaviour by their employers and masters, and annoyance sprouted in them slowly. The novel conceals message that the master's behaviour should be moderate to their servants and make them feel to be equal as human being.

Balram's humanity is still alive in his heart, before living Delhi after his crime, he thinks of Dharam and takes a risk to accompany him. Although, he has chosen wrong path to uplift forward; he is humble with his employees, respects them and understands their problem because his own roots belong to them. He gave compensation to the dead boy's family who is unintentionally killed by his taxi driver. But he is practical in his life; not let the staff gossip in his office and becoming so intimate; after their duty, immediately, they should leave the office. He says he is a white tiger and tigers don't like to become anybody's friend; he is The King, likes to be alone. Balram is a kind of person who is aspiring to overcome his social position. He becomes the driver of landlord's son Ashok and comes to Delhi. Here he understands the wide gap between the rich and the poor. A corrupt culture is seen in this novel where we can find that workers have no option other than migration. Poor farmers and villagers are migrated to large cities only to earn their bread and butter. In large cities they struggle to work. Either they break themselves or break the records. This image of India is the real image where we cannot deny that poor farmers and villagers are helpless.

At last, he plans to turn out to other business as Real Estate Business for American people; then opens a English Language School for poor children to teach them facts of life and prepare more 'White Tigers' and wants to become the 'Don' of Bangalore. Balram assures that he will never be catch by police due to this corruption prevails in the society; later he says 'Indian is a land of uncertainties'. He says if I will catch also I don't have any guilt feeling for my crime. Adiga wants to show us that the great economic miracle of India is driven through bribery and corruption. These are the dark areas of India. It is convincing to see that the novelist has given a detailed account of India which is realistic both in sense and approach. The various facets of the rural and the urban society have been revealed. The portrait of India has been generated through the cities like Laxmangarh, Gaya, Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore. The dark image of the country has been displayed through illiteracy, corruption, poverty, superstition, cultural conflict and many more. However, behind Adiga's savage representation of India lies the unpalatable truth of the suffering Indian masses, entailed by the corrupt, lopsided Indian administrative and social system, firmly tilted in favour of the elite. His description may not be truly realistic, but his courageous endeavour to expose the plight of the poor who remain obliquely hidden in Indian democratic system is highly commendable. His work is of paramount importance to realize the invisible boundaries laid upon the progress of the poor and working towards liberating them to the new horizon of equality, education and prosperity. No doubt, this is the novel with anti hero, paradox and irony.

Works Cited

- Adiga, Arvind. *The White Tiger*. Harper Colins Publishers India, 2008.
Desai, Kiran. *Hullabaloo in the Guava orchard*. Faber and Faber, 1998.
Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. Penguin Books India, 2006.