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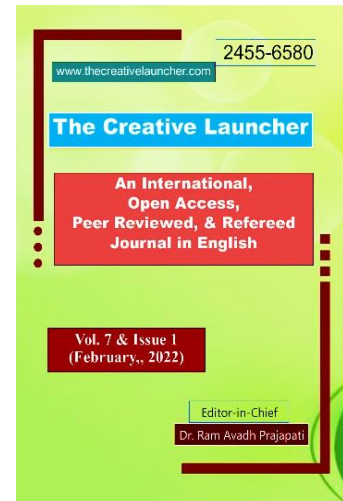
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## Social Criticism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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### Abstract

Social criticism is a form of criticism that deals with the shortcomings and flawed structures of the society in order to reform them. In India, since the inception of English writings, a number of works especially novels have been written in order to underscore several burning socio-cultural issues which have been problematic for the smooth functioning of the society. Aravind Adiga's epistolary novel, *The White Tiger*, is one such novel that tells the venturesome story of a character named Balram Halwai who writes a series of letters to Mr. Wen Jiabao, the Prime

Minister of China. In these letters, he elaborates his struggles, his moral degradation and his social upliftment as a result of his daredevilry and hard work. He also mentions how the corrupt behaviour of a number of government officials in the country has helped him to raise his status. Throughout the novel, Adiga tries to portray one or other social, political, religious or cultural problems which hinder the progress of his country. In the novel, he raises many crucial issues of the country such as hunger, oppression, poverty, illiteracy, sufferings, corruption in government offices, unemployment, dowry system, prostitution, rotten political system, feudalism, wrong doings of the religious heads etc. Most of these issues are based on the grounds of caste, class and religion which heavily influence Indian society.

**Keywords:** Social criticism, Corruption, Oppression, Hunger, Feudal Lords, Darkness

The word 'criticism' has been derived from the Greek word 'Kritikos' which means to see and judge something or someone on the basis of some pre-defined merits or demerits. It is the formation of judgment about the positive and negative qualities of someone or something. And one who does so is called a 'critic'. A critic does not only try to find faults with the things and persons but also highlight them so that they can be mended. The word 'social' stands for someone or something that is associated with the society. Thus, social criticism is a form of academic or journalistic criticism that focuses on numerous socio-cultural issues of our contemporary life. This sort of criticism focuses on the flaws of the society and deals with its weaknesses in order to reform them. A good social critic does not hide social realities of the society; rather, he tries to highlight them.

Literature is said to be the mirror of the society. It is an expression of thoughts and feelings of the people of society in which it emerges. It seems to be one of the best tools to underline the problems of any particular society. A writer is supposed to be the product of his/her own society and he/she knows about its issues better than anyone else. Writers have adopted this mode of criticism all the time across the globe. India also is not far behind in this field. There has been a long tradition of English writers in India who have been disenchanted by several socio-cultural norms of their respective societies. This disillusionment has got fairly ample space in the literary works of many budding writers of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Aravind Adiga is one of such writers who has delineated plethora of problematic socio-cultural issues in his

debut novel, *The White Tiger* which was published in 2008. The novel succeeded to receive Booker Prize of that year for its realistic portrayal of Indian society.

*The White Tiger* is an epistolary novel that tells the adventurous story of a village-bred lad, Balram Halwai alias Munna. He is the son of a rickshaw puller named Vikram Halwai. In this novel, the letters are written to Mr. Wen Jiabao, the Prime Minister of China, by 'The White Tiger' who himself is a thoughtful person and successful businessman of Bangalore. Balram, most skillfully, recounts the events of his own life in these letters. He narrates a great deal about the poverty and sufferings of the people in India. He tries to underscore the socio-political system of India and how it causes a number of nasty religious practices, superstitions, corruption in several government offices together with prostitution. In ventilating his views on these important issues, the writer highlights a number of binaries such as 'India of Light' and 'India of Darkness'; 'men with big stomachs' and 'men with small stomachs'; 'the rich and the poor'; 'the master and the slave' etc. These binaries help a lot to readers to understand various socio-cultural predicaments of Indian society.

Right from the starting of the novel, we encounter the inhabitants of the village named Laxmangarh. The utterly poor family of Vikram Halwai resides here in this village. On account of the extremely poor condition of his family, neither Balram Halwai nor his elder brothers could receive at least as much education as could enable them to find good jobs to sustain their lives. They have to seek work at the local tea shops, hotels or in coal mines. Later, Balram moves from his native place to the city of Dhanbad with his brother Kisan. Here, he decides to become a taxi driver and for that purpose, he starts raising money to take driving lessons from a taxi driver.

The landlords of the village of Balram can be held responsible for causing and aggravating the miseries of the poor villagers. They have turned the 'Indian Village Paradise' into hell. In the village of Laxmangarh, there are four sorts of oppressive landlords; namely the Wild Boar, the Stork, the Buffalo, and the Raven. The Stork is a bulky man who owns a river which flows outside the village. He charges every fisherman for fishing in the river and every boatman who crosses the river to come to his village. The Wild Boar is the owner of all the agricultural land around the village. Those who want to work there have to bow down before him and touch the sand under his sleepers for showing their respect for him. He hardly pays wages to them. The Raven is the owner of all the unfertile land around the village and he also

takes a cut from all the shepherds who go there with their flocks to graze them. The last one, the Buffalo, the greediest of them all, takes one-third of every day's earnings of all the rickshaw pullers of that area. All of them collectively loot the poor people of that area. Therefore, they are called 'Animals' who just live outside of Laxmangarh in high-walled mansions.

The novelist makes sincere efforts to delineate how these village landlords ceaselessly torture and exploit the poor innocent villagers with the help of other equally competent authorities such as politicians, government officials, police forces and priests. Poor villagers and farmers become easy prey to the maneuvers of these tricky minded people even in this age of globalization. They are deprived of all sorts of social justice. They have to face hunger, illiteracy, exploitation, unemployment and various other kinds of insecurities. Although Zamindari and Talookdari systems have been abolished long ago on paper with the help of constitutional amendments, they are still haunting the rural heartlands of India in one way or the other.

It is interesting to note how feelings and emotions of human beings affect their external behaviour. Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, is a sincere effort in this direction. It does not only portray the external realities of Indian school system but also depict how these realities change the very behaviour of Balram Halwai. He talks about the miserable condition of the Indian schools. Balram's teacher hardly conscientiously teaches his regular classes. He always tries to avoid his allotted duty. About mid-day meal, young Balram expresses his grievances in the following words, "We never ever saw rotis, or yellow dall, or pickles, and everyone knew why; the school teacher had stolen our lunch money" (33). His school teacher does so because he has not been paid his salary since last six months. The school teacher black-markets their school dresses which are meant to be distributed among them. Balram says, "We never saw them, but a week later, they turned up for sale in the neighboring village" (32). These acts of fraud and cheating and compulsion of his school teacher has long lasting effects on the personal life of Balram.

Adiga also highlights one of the most pertinent contemporary issues of majority of Indians; i.e., dowry system. In India, dowry makes a marriage highly costly, well beyond the means of ordinary families. Balram's family also faces the similar problem when the marriage of his cousin sister, Reena, is fixed. He states, "We had to give the boy a new bicycle, and cash, and a silver bracelet, and arrange for a big wedding" (36). The family has to take a loan to bear

the expenses of the marriage from one of the village landlords, the Stork. As a result of this loan, the family members have to work day in day out so that they can pay back the amount of the loan.

In 'the second night' section of the novel, the stories of rottenness, corruption, bribery, treachery etc. of the city life have been portrayed. The life becomes darker when Balram move with Ashok, his village landlord, the Stork's son and his wife Pinky Madam to Delhi. Here, he gets the job of driving Ashok. One day, while driving after drinking, Pinky Madam crushes an unidentified child under the wheels of her speeding car. The onus of this accident is forcefully transferred onto Balram who by now had engaged in a number of cases of bribery on his employer's behalf and learnt that the only way to escape the torture of his employer is to kill Ashok whose wife already, after the accident, had gone back to America. He feels to be in a web of exploitation and one day in order to get rid of it, he kills his employer for the sake of seven hundred thousand rupees and moves along with his cousin, Dharam, to Bangalore. He uses the money in starting a business. Soon he becomes a successful businessman with the help of those tricks which he learnt in Delhi. Here, it becomes evident that no Indian state is free from corruption. Police officials, after getting heavy amount as bribery, shield him instead of arresting him.

Adiga also points out towards the malpractices existing in the medical department in his novel. It is depicted in the novel that most of the patients who are admitted in these government hospitals are not treated well. In most of the cases, they are left dejected and disappointed. Talking about a particular hospital named Lohia Universal Free Hospital, he says that whoever is admitted in this hospital would hardly go to his/her home fully cured. Delineating the real picture of these government hospitals, he writes that the post of the Medical Superintendent usually is on sale and whoever is ready to pay, gets it. The attendance of the junior doctors is filled for the exchange of their one third salaries. Under such circumstances, it becomes very difficult for the poor patients to get quality treatment from these hospitals. In one of these hospitals, Balram's father died of tuberculosis, a disease adequately found in rickshaw pullers, due to the lack of proper timely treatment in the hospital.

Adiga highlights how the country is divided into two; one for the rich and another for the poor. He uses a number of binaries such as poor/rich, slave/master, day/night, light/darkness etc. to depict this reality. The inhabitants of the Darkness are largely poor with small bellies

and those who live in big buildings in rural and urban both areas with big bellies are the rich people. Thus, he makes a clear division between the “India of Light and India of Darkness” (14). The majority of Indian population lives in the area of Darkness. Balram’s own family live in darkness in the village of Laxmanpur; but he raises his status to level of being a person of the area of Light with his hard work, will-power and tricky behaviour. He himself accepts the fact, “I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness” (14). The words ‘darkness’ ‘light’ etc. have been symbolically used here to show the social contrast of Indian society. In order to be the part of the area of Light, Balram has to kill his master, bribe the police officials and has to do a number of other illegal, unethical activities. Thus, it becomes evident that he reaches to the area of Light after his moral darkness or degradation.

Adiga criticizes the blind religious beliefs. He underscores how the holy Ganga has been polluted by those who worship it and call it “Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of the illumination” (15) etc. He also targets the corrupt politicians. In one of his statements, Balram can be heard saying about a so-called socialist political leader:

You see, a total of ninety-three cases-for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-smuggling, pimping, and many other such minor offences-are pending against the Great Socialist and his ministers at the present moment...The Great Socialist himself is said to have embezzled one billion rupees from the Darkness, and transferred that money into a bank account in a small, beautiful country in Europe full of white people and black money. (97-98)

He also aims to highlight the malpractices involved in Indian electoral system. He categorizes ‘election fever’ as a disease together with typhoid and cholera. He tries to show how politicians try to manipulate voters’ vote by providing them money, eatables, making false promises etc. and how, when once they win, they disappear for the next five years. Thus, elections could be “managed in India” (231). This looting of democracy is bitterly criticized in the novel. He states about the last election, “Like eunuchs discussing the *Kama Sutra*, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh” (98). In his estimation, the Parliamentary democracy has been captured by the “most outrageous bunch of thugs”, therefore India “will never catch up with China for this single reason” (280).

Dr. Vishnu Kumar writes, “Social criticism has always been a medium or device to improve the society” (221). Aravind Adiga variously makes bitter biting comments on the

present socio-political and religious condition of India in his novel, *The White Tiger*. In the words of A.N. Dwivedi, *The White Tiger* contains, “a biting criticism of the prevailing socio-political scenario of our country” (155). He tries his best to lay open several exiting social, political, religious and cultural evils such as poverty, illiteracy, sufferings, corruption in government offices, unemployment, dowry system, prostitution, rotten political system, feudalism, wrong doings of the religious heads in the name of gods and goddesses etc. of the society. Thus, it can be reasonably summarized that the novel successfully meets its criteria of social criticism.

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