

From Poverty to Cruelty: The Protagonist, Balram's Journey in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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A man is insensible to the relish of prosperity till he has tasted adversity.

--- Muslih-uddin Sadi

The role of underclass is undoubtedly important in the progress of India, but the class has been neglected due to the age-old intricate issues of caste, class, religion and gender. The underclasses have neither representatives nor spokespersons in the society they live in so they suffer helplessly and get marginal place in the history and culture of which they are the essential part as human beings. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) is a trenchant critique of contemporary India and an exposure of the real but ugly face of India's heart of darkness, particularly - the rural India. A historical overview of Indian Writing in English shows many such writers, who have tried to portray the simmering dark of reality that usually seems to remain hidden from the glare of the mainstream media and literature. Mulk Raj Anand, one of the early Indian writers in English, explores these alleys in his *Untouchable* (1935) followed by V.S. Naipaul, Kiran Desai, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and others. However, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga have made conscious efforts to highlight the political, social and cultural issues, which constitute the very fibre of Indian life to disclose the dark alleys.

Gaining the first hand experience as a journalist, Adiga has blazed on the sphere of IEL (Indian English Literature) with his debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008). It bagged him the Man Booker Prize 2008, and created two Indias, "that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (Adiga 14). It tells the story of Balram Halwai – a young man from Bihar and his journey from a driver in Delhi to an entrepreneur in Bangalore. Surprisingly, Balram does not depend on hard toil for his development but on the easy way to success through slitting the throat of his employer and owning his money despite the threat of the employer's family taking revenge on his family in the village.

Disgusted with the Zamindari practices and exploitation, Balram decides to break the law of his land and turn bad news into good news and not to stay as a slave. He learns driving and becomes a driver to the local landlord's son, Mr. Ashok, who returns from America and lives in Delhi - a place of corruption. Before Independence, India was like a clean well-ordered zoo but the day the British left the cages that have been let open and the animals attacked and ripped each other apart and the jungle law replaced zoo law. And it causes the most ferocious, the hungriest and the grown up big bellies to emerge in modern India, despite caste and religion. In ancient India there were one thousand castes and destines, but these days, "there are just two castes: Men with Big bellies, and Men with Small Bellies" (Adiga 64). The living condition of auto and taxi drivers is pathetic as they are forced to sweep the floor, make tea and clean cobwebs because the rich are always interested to "have servants". Balram is destined not to drive but to wash the two white dogs - Cuddles and Puddles, otherwise he may have to lose his job. He is not treated even equal to the dogs and it is understood when the watchman shouts at him as he takes the dogs around on a chain, "Don't pull the chain so hard! They're worth more than you are!" (Adiga 78). It is poverty in Laxmangarh and Gaya that causes an exodus of jobless youths towards big cities, Balram Halwai and his brother are no exception.

Indian democracy facilitates politicians to make fake promises and some politicians publicly say that India is going to beat China, where we haven't achieved the basic things like sewage and drinking water yet. If we truly want to make a country, we should get sewage pipes first then only "democracy". Though we feel proud of our glorious democracy, the elections are manipulated and cause power transformation from one hand to another, where the common man's fate remains unchanged. As Adiga considers there are three main diseases, "typhoid, cholera and election fever," and he finds, "the last one the worst" (Adiga 98). Moneybags, muscle power and fake promises woo the underclass to assure the victory in the political game where Balram has done in general, state and local election since he turns eighteen and he reports that he is India's most faithful voter and still he has not seen the inside of a voting booth. Commenting on the corrupt election mela, Krishna Singh writes, "Moneybags, muscle power, police, strategic alignment of various factions and power to woo the underclass assure the victory in the political game" (97).

Though we are proud of our capital - Delhi, the seat of parliament and of course the pride of civic planning, it is, “the showcase of the republic,” where murder, rape, revenge, liquor, and prostitution are quite common. The cruelty of Indian masters is proved when Balram is forced to take blame of the car accident committed by Pinky madam during her rash driving. Balram is called upon to sign a paper stating that he has made the accident instead Pinky madam. This is exactly what happens to drivers in Delhi everyday and the jails of Delhi are full of drivers, who take the blame for their masters as Balram admits that even if they have left the villages, the masters own their body, soul and arse. Balram emerges as a symbol of loyalty when he is ready to go to Thihar jail for his employer because he is a loyal and perfect servant. Commenting on his loyalty, Shilpi Saxena writes, “Balram becomes a witness to the dark India of social, political and religious unjust systems where fatal accident caused by the drunken owners are not reported, the police is greased to keep silent, drivers are compelled to sign confessionals, servants are treated worse than animals, corruption and moral decline is in every sphere of life” (140). The greatest thing that has come out of this country in the last ten thousand years of its history is the unrebllious attitude of the Indians because, “Indians are the world’s most honest people” (Adiga 174). The underclass learns to be honest despite poverty and it has become the basis of the entire Indian economy. They respect family system, so they are bound to the chains of Indian marriage system where as the rich do not respect it and take divorce easily. It is understood when Pinky madam hands over an envelope to Balram and leaves Mr. Ashok unannounced. But Balram is blamed for the elopement for following the instruction of madam to take her to the airport.

The innocent Balram is now habituated to the city ways of, “debauchery, depravity and wickedness,” because all these changes first happened in Mr. Ashok. So Balram supports himself and feels, “once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent?” (Adiga 197). Gradually, Balram starts cheating his employer, siphoning his petrol, maintaining corrupt bills and each time he looks at the money he has made by cheating not in guilt but in rage. The more he steals from his master, the more he realizes how much he has stolen from him. Balram’s journey from the rural to the urban teaches him that the underclass remains unchanged as Krishna Singh observes, “Balram’s journey from Laxmangarh to

Dhanbad, then Delhi and finally to Bangalore endorses that the socio-psychological condition of the underclass remains unchanged” (99).

To escape his desperate self-destructive fate, Balram makes a giant leap of faith that ends in inventing and allows him to grow beyond the societal hurdles and finally a murderer. Balram stamps his knee on his master’s chest and unlids the collar button to mark out the spot where he pierces his neck that spurts out his life blood. When Balram gets the blood out of his eyes, it is, “all over for Mr. Ashok,” and the blood is, “draining from the neck quite fast - that is the way the Muslims kill their chickens” (Adiga 285). Speaking on Balram’s deed, Krishna Singh writes, “Murder of Ashok by Balram is the reaction of deep-rooted frustration of underclass experiencing the polarities between the upper class and lower class” (99). That is how Balram changes from, “a hunted criminal into a solid pillar of Bangalorean society” (Adiga 292). Now, he is emerged as a North Indian entrepreneur settled in Bangalore and calls himself, “Ashok Sharma”, who has employed sixteen drivers working in shifts with twenty six vehicles. Ashok Sharma is a dreamer of new Bangalore and he hopes the city may turn out to be a decent city, “where humans can live like humans and animals can live like animals” (Adiga 317). The novel ends on the grounds where we all should concentrate on the dark areas of our polity, culture and social milieu to turn them into light to have *One India* not in word but in spirit.

Works Cited

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