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THE (UN)CHANGING INDIA IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga's debut novel compellingly speaks of suppression and exploitation of various sections of society in India. It is a story of Balram, a young boy's voyage from Darkness to Light, from rags to riches, transforming from a village teashop boy into a Bangalore entrepreneur. The paper argues class divide and disempowerment in India which is making poor poorer and rich richer. The paper investigates not only how Balram underwent the pathetic and rigorous life as an underclass boy but also the way he escalated to a position of business tycoon in Bangalore city. Against this backdrop, the paper analyses the protagonist's ability to overcome the hardships and harsh realities of life, keeping his dreams alive and achieving global echelon.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga; Class Division; Disempowerment; Global; Suppression

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Indian culture is deep-rooted in the concept of dharma (normative order), karma (moral character) and jati (caste) as the hierarchical principles of social stratification. Although the concept was widely practiced in the past yet even today it is followed and has taken a vicious form which segregates people from one another and creates void among people. This has led to suppression and exploitation of various sections of society, including women. At one hand when India is achieving global echelon by claiming for permanent seat in UN Security Council, it is also surrounded by multitude of problems which Aravind Adiga has rightly been able to address in his novel *The White Tiger*. He has raised the issues of social problems of utter poverty, moral corruption, rising intolerance, child labour, communal hatred, escalating unemployment, tax evading rackets, embittered master servant relationship, weakening family structure and economic and social disparities prevalent in Indian society. The novel also reflects the brighter picture of shining India, social mobility and progressing India. However, so far economic growth has irrationally benefitted only the rich.

The novel is lauded for the way it deals with larger social issues in light of emerging global advancements. (Man Booker Prize Stories) The novel strongly represents the widening void between the rich and the poor. On one hand, the rich shop in standout malls, stay in lavish apartments, have offices in skyscraper buildings epitomizing industrial growth and could bargain real blonde prostitutes whereas on the other hand, the poor shop in filthy areas, resides in fallow basements, stays in slums adjoining every posh area and have to convince themselves with sham prostitutes.

He is a voice of poor peasants, slum dwellers and exploited class. His writing states the postcolonial nervousness: incurable communal chauvinism, migration to cities for better life, crookedness of politicians, furious laws, moral corruption, march for free-market capital, lawlessness and anarchy in the social system.

Some people feel it as infamous and unglamorous portrayal of India which was taken as insult and indignity. But in an interview in *The Guardian* newspaper he made it clear, "what I'm trying to do is not an attack on the country; it's about the greater process of self-examination." He also added "*We've got to get beyond that as Indians and take responsibilities for what is holding us back.*" (*The Guardian*) In an interview with Jonathan Derbyshire, he replied, "*I'm in two minds what's happening. I grew up in a very different India. My life then was very much structured around shame and guilt; it was a very conservative society. But that India has gone.*" To him, "*the book is an attempt to relocate India in a political and economic context.*"

The White Tiger (2008) is a story of voyage of Balram Halwai, the protagonist from Darkness to Light, from rags to riches, transforming from a village teashop boy into a Bangalore entrepreneur. Prasannarajan in "*Alone in Dusklund*" says that the novel "*has taken an exhilarating ride through the darkest alleys of modern India*". It is a tale of "*an India of Light and an India of Darkness*". It contains some of very astute reservations about class divide and disempowerment in India.

The novel begins with a letter to premier of China on the eve of a state visit to India, about the triumph of entrepreneurial spirit in the world's largest democracy. He forecasts the bright future for two countries by writing the following lines:

".....speaks directly between the two contenders for the future for the world in 'the century of the yellow and the brown man. You and Me" (*The White Tiger*, p 5)

He has the entrepreneurial spirit as he is not "*a Half-baked Indian*" (*The White Tiger*, p 10) and has surpassed the 'rooster coop' and the harsh realities of life. He keeps his dreams alive and sustains them inside. He was determined not to surrender himself in front of the difficult and worst condition. To him, people in India are destined to "*eat or get eaten up*" but his father's words always inspired him, "*I was destined not to stay as slave or get eaten up.*" He says, "*My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that of mine- at least one-should live like a man.*" These lines reflect the agonies of poor and the suffering to rise in life and break the darkness to move towards the light. The flabbergasting inner thoughts of the protagonist Balram Halwai have escalated him to be 'The White Tiger', the one that is rare and exceptional.

The novel moves around Balram Halwai's village Laxmangarh. Laxmangarh is India in microcosm. What happens in the story is what happened everywhere in rural India. It goes along with K.A.Abbas novel *Tomorrow is Ours* that exposes "*the exploitation of the poor Indians by the rich Indians.*" (Harres; 218) Aravind Adiga's explanation of Rooster Coop is true depiction of what happens in India. He says that the area behind Jama Masjid in Old Delhi is a chicken market where hundreds of roosters are brutally killed every day. They know they're next yet they don't rebel. They accept their fate the way it's destined for them. It shows their helplessness and vulnerability. The same is done to the humans. The poor peasants have to suffer the evils of feudal lords. The narrator scathingly states this rich and poor divide, in these lines:

"....In this country, we have two kinds of men: Indian liquor men and English liquor men. 'Indian' liquor is for village boys like me- toddy, arrack, country hooch. 'English' liquor, naturally, is for the rich. Rum, whisky, beer, gin-anything the English left behind." (*The White Tiger*, p 73)

In explaining the Rooster Coop, Balram expresses the loyalty of servants and their controlled perception:

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

(*The White Tiger*, p 174)

He further adds that this is the common behavior of all upper class people to belittle and ill treat them. He could clearly visualize what's happening around and wants to set a new moral code of conduct to

lead a successful life. He has a strong urge to break out of coop and live a respectful life. He thinks one has to risk life and family to break this coop:

“...only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed –hunted, beaten, and burned alive by masters – can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature (*The White Tiger*, pp. 175-7).

The narrator mocks the pathetic condition of education in rural India. Bhupinder Singh (2006), in his essay on ‘Ambedkar on Higher Education’ quotes,

“I cannot forget, rather I am sad, that many people do not realize that the Caste system is existing in India for centuries because of inequality and a wide gulf of difference in education, and they have forgotten that it is likely to continue for some centuries to come.”

Dr B.R. Ambedkar always advocated the role of rural education in upliftment and progress of distressed section of society. But it seems nothing has changed in rural India and things have deteriorated from worse to worsen. In Laxmangarh School, there is a typical school teacher called “–big Paan and spit Man” (*The White Tiger*, p 29), who goes to sleep by noon and drinks toddy in the school. Supply of food, dress and aids to the school goes to the teacher who gives legitimate excuse for it “–he hadn’t been paid his salary in six months” (*The White Tiger*, p 33). “The school dresses for the students were found – for sale in the neighbouring village” (*The White Tiger*, p 33). It seems that “the whole education system is corrupt and run by the –crowd of thugs and idiots” (*The White Tiger*, p 35). It is quite common in rural schools that the teachers remain absconding from the school on the pretext of low payment or delayed payment. They try to compensate it by stealing government aids. Such is the despicable state of rural schools. Lack of proper education paired with entrenched social hierarchy holds large numbers back from becoming dynamic individuals.

Balram Halwai sets an account of the mayhem and corruption in the Political System. The vision with which Gandhi wanted political parties to work has been equally defied by the mainstream national parties. It shows “national failure” by foiling Gandhi’s values and preaching. (Paul F Power, 32) He always fought social prejudices and transformed the outlook of masses in India (K.M.Panniker, 128). But nothing seemed to change in Laxmangarh, the Great Socialist Party always “ruled the Darkness, winning election after election” (*The White Tiger*, p 97). The criminals, murders and rapists come back to power by distributing money, liquor and using force to threaten the voters. After the election the poor villagers discuss on it like “eunuchs discussing the KamaSutra.” (*The White Tiger*, p 98). Ironically, elections bring no change in the life of common people it only fills treasury of the winners and political parties. Their participation in elections with such a vigor and vehemence is futile and they have no say in any decision making policies. They are mere ‘eunuchs’ (*The White Tiger*, p 98). Desai (2011) one of the Indian novelists also makes harsh 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”. All corrupt practices are carried on like bribing to the bureaucrats, showing nepotism, instigating communal clashes and making the criminals to go scot-free. The Police are in hand in gloves with the corrupt political system. It is squeaking under the strain of officialdom and inefficiency.

The Police may not register a case against rich or let them go free on payment of some bribe but will put a poor person behind bars sometimes for no reason. The following lines well expresses this thought:

“A man on bicycle getting killed- the police even do not have to register a case. A man on motorbike getting killed-they would have to register that. A man in a car getting killed- they would have thrown me in the jail.” (*The White Tiger*, p 309)

In the novel, Pinky Madam in a fit of drunkenness, runs over a street urchin and is forced to sign a statement of culpability. The hit and run case is quickly hushed by bribing some policemen and Balram goes scot free. Pinky Madam, horrified by this accident walks out of marriage goes back to US. Ashok violently accosts him for aiding his wife’s escape to airport. Balram finds himself deranged with fury seeing his master shamelessly pander to politicians to cover up massive tax fraud. He says, “Once the master of Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent?” (*The White Tiger*, p 197)

Adiga's narrative in the novel *The White Tiger* represents the frustration and agony of a peripheral man who struggles hard to claim his right to be at the Centre. This sometimes leads a person like Balram to involve in violent crime like murder. However, murder is not a justified reason to climb the ladder of success yet Balram's belief in humanity after achieving entrepreneurial zenith is the result of his guilt and repentance.

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