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QUEST FOR FREEDOM IN ARVIND ADIGA'S NOVEL *THE WHITE TIGER*

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ABSTRACT

The White Tiger is the Man Booker Prize winning debut novel by Indian author Arvind Adiga published in 2008. The present novel reflects a reality of Indian life which is kept hidden from society. After globalization there is a huge chasm between rich and poor India. A handful of rich class wants to have control over the large population of India. The writer has dexterously presented the life of servitude, religion, corruption, social caste system, poverty in India before the reader. This novel is a success story of the central character, Balram Halwai narrated by himself in his letter to Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. Balram Halwai is an ambitious young man. Though he is born and brought up in a socially low category, he does not want to continue his father's traditional business. He wants to get escape from all social restrictions of servitude. He expects freedom from Rooster Coop to become a successful businessman. In his way to success, he removes all the hindrances. He transcends his sweet-maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur. He does pay off his family money and even murders his employer Mr. Ashok. He discards all controls over him by family and society. On the contrary without any remorse for his foul acts he rationalizes his desperate ambition and aspirations for power and self. So far as his efforts and achievement is concerned he dubbed himself as White Tiger which is seen once in a generation.

Keywords: globalization, poverty, caste system, freedom, corruption, bribery, rooster coop, entrepreneur.

Introduction

An Indian born and Australian educated Arvind Adiga has written three novels entitled *The White Tiger*, *Between the Assassinations*, and *Last Man in Tower*. His first novel focuses the challenges in the Indian villages with special reference social issues. The second one focuses on the stories of the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the last one focuses on the story of struggling and resist for real estate in Mumbai. He has written four short stories entitled *The Sultan's Battery*, *Smack*, *Last Christmas in Bandra* and *The Elephant*. His debut novel *The White Tiger* published by Harper Collins in 2008 won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the same year. He emerged significantly on the Indian literary horizon. It has been well received, making to the New York Times bestseller list. He has represented the struggling of deprived class for liberation from social restrictions imposed on them by upper class. The novel is about a dark picture of India's

struggle after globalization where nation is divided into the light and dark India. It reflects the journey of young man from a terrible poverty to a successful entrepreneur. The writer has tried to draw a line between darkness and light. Dominating theme of the novel is all that the author aims at conveying to the readers, projecting India, the poor down-trodden people of India and the Indian landscape which he calls darkness as against the rich palace of affluent people which are termed as light. The novel examines the issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. It is the unspoken voice of the people from the darkness that is the impoverished areas of rural India. Arvind Adiga "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humourless weaklings as they are usually." The theme of corruption and freedom from poverty and servitude are very important in the novel. The novel revolves around the central character Balram Halwai who narrates his success story through the letters to Chinese businessman, Wen Jiabao. In his letter, Balram explains how he the son of a rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman describing himself as an entrepreneur.

The present paper throws light on the prevailing caste-system, corruption, bribery in government offices are the evils which damage the Indian economy.

The protagonist of the novel, Balram, an intelligent young boy was born in the rural village of Laxmangarh, where he lived with his large extended family. Throughout his youth he is surrounded by poverty, disease and malnutrition. His destitute family lives at the mercy of four cruel and exploitative landlords known as the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Raven and the Buffalo referred to collectively as "The Animals".

Balram's mother died when he was young and his father is a rickshaw puller. In the beginning he was named simply as "Munna". Even his family had not bothered to name him. He did not have any proper name until his school master called him Balram. It means in deprived society young boys are not given proper names. His parents are also not concerned about his name. Balram says:

"mother's very ill.....she lies in bed and spews blood. She's got no time to name and father is a rickshaw puller... he's got no big loan from Stork who in lieu of that demanded all members of the family to work for him. (*The White Tiger* 38).

He is a smart boy but straitened condition of his family forced him to leave school in order to help pay for his cousin's dowry. So, he begins to work in a tea-shop with his brother in Dhanbad. But on the other hand he continued educating himself listening to the conversations of the customers at the tea-shop. Being a restless child, while working he used to make his receptors active. He was listening to the conversations of the customers. Through it, he learns many things about India's economy and the politics. In his positive things, he considers himself a good listener.

Balram is an ambitious child. He is not satisfied with his lot. He refers to himself as a half-baked Indian as he was prevented from schooling for formal education. But he believes that lack of schooling cannot be an obstacle in his social ambition of being an entrepreneur. He thinks that all Indian entrepreneurs are half-baked. He wants to be a rich person discarding the bindings of servitude and the family responsibility. He expects total freedom from Rooster Coop which is the fate of people like Balram. He decides to become a driver. After learning how to drive, he finds a job driving Ashok, the son of one of the landlords of Laxmangarh. Gradually, he takes over the job of main driver from a small car to a heavy-luxury Honda-city car. In his service as a main driver he presents himself as a loyal to his employer. Day by day he gets divorced from morality and family ethics. Balram stops sending money to his poor family and disrespects grandmother during his stay at village. He is a victim of half-baked moral and values.

Balram moves to New Delhi with Ashok and Pinky madam. There, throughout in his stay he gets chance to visit government officers with his Master Ashok. He observes malpractices like corruption and bribery in the government offices. He thinks that a huge chasm is made between rich and poor only by selfish association based on benefit between officers and people like Ashok. He finds that money plays a crucial role in business contracts. He comes to know that many legal and illegal practices going on there.

Balram is forced to be exploited by the elite class. He is a victim of half-baked morals and values and subject to insult. Balram witnesses incompatibility between his master Ashok and his wife Pinky. One night drunkard Pinky Madam takes the wheel from Balram and hits a child. Pinky madam leaves her husband and returns to the US. In her absence, Ashok goes out to bars and clubs hiring a prostitute one night, and

reconnecting with a former lover on another. Ashok's family mounts pressure on Balram to take the responsibility of driving and the incident. Ashok becomes increasingly involved in bribing government officials for the benefit of family coal business. Balram thinks that killing Ashok is the only way to escape India's Rooster Coop. After killing Ashok and stealing a large amount of bribe, Balram moves to Bangalore. There he adopts the same trick of giving bribe witnessed in the government offices. He gives bribe to the police to start his own taxi business. Balram justifies his own act of killing his employer Ashok. Balram's family was certainly killed by Ashok's relatives as retribution for his murder.

Balram has a considerable faith in his exceptional quality, thinking himself "White Tiger" not succumbed to conservative ethics or social expectations. He has the entrepreneurial spirit as he is not 'half-baked Indian' (*The White Tiger*, p.10) He was determined not to surrender before the difficult and worst condition. To him people of India are destined to "eat or eaten up". They accept their fate. But his father's words always inspired him, 'I was not to stay slave or eat or eaten up' Adiga's explanation of Rooster Coop is true depiction of what happens in India. Poor peasants have to suffer the evils of feudal lords. Even the things like liquor separates India that is Indian liquor of village poor boys and English liquor for rich class boys. In India we have two kinds of men: Indian liquor men and English liquor men.

"India is two countries into one, India of Light and an India of Darkness. Ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off but the river brings darkness to India. (*The White Tiger*.14)

He describes the loyalty of poor towards the rich:

"Every day, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffeur is driving an empty car with a black suitcase 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." (p.174)

Balram expresses his displeasure and protest against the way in which the lower class people compelled in servitude. He is a typical representative of lower class and he struggles to set free from exploitation and oppression at the hands of landlords and businessmen. Thus through the character of Balram, the novelist projects victimization of underprivileged class due to various social evils like caste system, unemployment, poverty, corruption, election, misuse of welfare schemes and education system. The novel explores the terrible facts of Indian society. His struggle starts at very young age when his father borrows loan from village landlord for the marriage dowry of his cousin sister, Reena. In return all the members of his family have to work for the landlord, Stork. But Balram wants to escape from the socio-economic imprisonment.

Observing his master's gradual corruption and driving him seedier districts Balram becomes disillusioned and resentful. Although Ashok is relatively kind towards Balram, he realizes that his generosity is a fraction of what he can afford. Ashok has no interest in helping Balram achieve better life or in changing status quo. The sequence of events creates in him desperate ambition and he cherishes a dream of becoming a rich by hook or crook. Things take a vicious turn when Balram realizes that the only way to be famous and get power and self is to murder his master. He realizes that there is no point in brooding over the wretched past of his life.

He does not want his family members to come in his dream. So he performs last rites for family members after coming to Bangalore. It means his ambitious spirit to break the rooster coop kills his emotions and social feeling for others. He also observes proximity of government doctors, entrepreneurs, tax payers, industrialists with ministers to fulfill their vested interests. Even elections are manipulated in India. After winning elections no party has any interest in the upliftment of poor. Their fate remains unchanged. They are used as vote bank by giving promises and little money.

Therefore, Balram's untruthfulness, corruption dishonesty, indifference towards family, dissolute behaviour, involvement in criminal acts like bribery and murder are the outcome of his poverty. So Balram plans to murder Ashok and escape. Day by day, his master Ashok gets involved politically and his divorce from his wife Pinky Madam also made him lonely. Balram seizes this opportunity and kills his master Ashok Sharma to become master. He escapes with the red bag loaded with money for bribing politicians for evading tax and illegal mining and begins a new life at an alien place in Bangalore as entrepreneur running a car service to

BPO's. He transforms himself into a master from a servant. When Balram takes to the path of corruption, bribery and murders his employer he forms his taxi company. Finally, things become in his favour when he changes his name to Ashok Sharma. This company is known as 'The White Tiger Drivers'. His elevation from servitude to an employer and owner of the company is not an easy going process. There are so many difficulties and hurdles of social elite class taboos. He says:

"The journey from Darkness to the Light is not smooth.....only a White Tiger can do this."(*The White Tiger*,p.250)

Being an intelligent, determined, courageous and ambitious, Balram removes all the hindrances in his way with his tricks learned from people like Ashok. The secrets of success in a modern globalized world are murder, manipulation, malpractices, opportunism, absconding police and judicial proceedings. All these contribute to the suffering of poor. Balram rationalizes his criminal actions, and considers that his freedom is worth the lives of his family and Ashok. According to him, his crime is nothing but an entrepreneur spirit. Balram becomes Ashok Sharma: a Bangalore based successful entrepreneur is confident about his disguise that he is one of those who cannot be caught in India.

It is this India of Darkness which is focused by the novelist articulating the voice of underclass silent majority. Balram is that representative voice of this underprivileged class who is struggling to set free from age-old slavery and exploitation. His anger, protest, indulgence in criminal acts, prostitution, drinking, chasing and grabbing the opportunities reflect his frustration in life and revolt against the prevailed social system ruled by handful elite and rich class. Today's politics, bureaucratic set-up, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstition, social taboos, dowry practice, economic disparity, Zamindari, corruption in education, poor health services, police and judicial working sow seeds of underclass section of society. These social evil forces operate to victimize this silent majority of underclass. Thus the novel provides a true picture of gross malpractices in Indian democracy and society. A close nexus between politicians, criminals, police and media is harmful to Indian democracy and its economy. It is a social criticism focusing on poverty and misery of India and its religio-socio-political conflicts presented through humour and irony.

Conclusion

Arvind Adiga is considered as one of the most distinguished Indian English novelists who enjoy the privilege of winning the most prestigious Man Booker Prize for his debut novel *The White Tiger*. He took the challenges against the economic, social and cultural exploitation, lacking of morals and values in politics and bureaucracy, spiritual suppression of poor in India. Through this novel, he highlights the ever widening space among the rich and the poor, the rural and the urban, and the brutality of a system that allows a small minority to prosper at the expense of the silent under privileged class majority. Balram is an example of awareness in underprivileged class and will no longer tolerate any kind of social suppression. Adiga's exposure of the seamy side of democratic India can be taken as a challenge before the government. If government focuses and works on those dark areas of India to cure the sick image of India, undoubtedly a new India will emerge on the world horizon.

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