

## Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a Re-inscription of Modern India

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### Abstract

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The image of modern India had acquired such media hype and its success stories started receiving so much massive attention that the sufferings of the vast majority of the poor both in the rural and urban India remained unheard in the din. The economic, scientific and technological boom in India had attained the new denomination of the grand narratives of the country. This image of a successful India whitewashes the sufferings of the poor and the socio-economic problems that challenge the growth and development of the nation. Aravind Adiga wrote his Man Booker Prize winning debut novel *The White Tiger* in 2008 to question such popular image of a modern India. He wanted to re-inscribe the imagination of the present generation about the sordid deprivation of the 99.9 percent of the people so that the research scholars, political leaders and policy makers get new directions to address. This article has explicated how the landlordism, poverty, ill-equipped education system, poor health facilities, corruption in government agencies and moral degeneration have been aggravating the sufferings of the poor and decelerating the development of the nation.

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Indian English literature has always been actively taking challenges in the nation building process. During the colonial era, India's quest for identity began by eradicating her own evil practices at home in her characteristic way. Home to diverse deeply rooted spiritual and religious fabric, the country focused on strengthening the nation from inside by fighting against its own evils in the social, cultural, economic and political life.

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The fiction of the three great novelists, R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao can be regarded as path-breakers as their masterpieces were written at a time when India was overwhelming her political, social, religious, cultural and ideological world to reassert her latent identity. Even during that highly glorious nationalistic and patriotic period (particularly in the first half of the twentieth century because of India's struggle for independence against the British rule), instead of focusing only in depicting the brighter aspects of Indian cultural life, they saw the greatest challenge before them was to raise the individual, social and spiritual issues to work on them for building a more progressive and prosperous India. The fictional world of Aravind Adiga, as a continuation to that tradition, demonstrates how the Indian society has been heading towards moral/spiritual decadence and economic exploitation, and the great challenges R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao took to reform India is still incomplete.

Aravind Adiga is one of the very few modern Indian novelists who took the present day challenges against the economic exploitation and the political deprivation, the social marginalization and the spiritual subjugation of the poor that is taking place in India behind the screen of economic, infrastructural, political and technological development. In an interview with Nick DiMartino (2014), Adiga expressed his motivation behind writing his novel, *The White Tiger*, "I wanted to depict someone from India's underclass—which is perhaps 400 million strong—and which has largely missed out on the economic boom, and which remains invisible in most films and books coming out of India" (p.1).

Addressing the socio-economic problems to develop India from inside is both a strength and a tradition of India as a nation and Adiga, with such an attitude, has taken a twenty-first-century step to bring to light the tragic deprivation of both the rural and urban poor societies against the propagandist images of a happy and successful modern India. To achieve that, first thing he did is to convince the readers that there are two Indias: "two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" and this is also true even in the urban settings which should have been away from the spell of the traditional socio-cultural hegemony of the dominating middle class over the downtrodden (Adiga, 2008, p. 10). In his email to the Chinese Premier, Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel, explained, "Delhi is the capital of not one but *two* countries—two Indias. The Light and the Darkness both flow into Delhi" (p. 150).

In clarifying the two Indias, Cristina Mendes (2010) appropriately remarked, "The India of Light is that of wealth, technology and knowledge, while the India of Darkness (where the majority of Indians live) is that of misery, destitution and illiteracy" (p. 277). But what is tragic is that the success story of the tiny minority is being used to create a metaphor of a strong and shining India. This image of a modern India needs to be re-inscribed with the images of the sufferings of the poor both in the rural and urban societies so that the media, scholars, policy makers and political leaders, instead of carrying the false glory, can address the problems to eradicate them.

Adiga's main focus in the novel was to make the people see how the large majority of the people have been suffering in the country. Their life has become a curse to them. Although the rich have been enjoying the fruit of the scientific and economic development of the nation, the life of the poor has become worse in the process. This continuous degradation of the poor has not been appropriately represented in the media so as to work on their well-being. The inundating images that appear about modern India are that of the rising economic, scientific and political power in the world scenario. Under the spell of these shining images, the policy makers and the people fail to see the sufferings of the downtrodden. To Adiga, for India to claim emancipation in social, cultural, economic and educational terms, it must make sure to provide good quality education and uplift the living condition of the vast majority of the poor. Adiga feels there is an urgent need to re-educate the people about the gap between the life of the tiny minority and the mass. It is important to re-inscribe our imagination with the images of the sufferings of the poor so that we can plan and execute the poverty eradication programs. Adiga depicted how both in the rural and urban India, the ruling class keep themselves aloof from the common people so that they may not feel the way the poor are suffering in their villages and slums. So, through his novels, at least the rich and the ruling class may be re-educated and re-generated so that they can get a feel of the sordid and pathetic life of the poor. Adiga believes this re-inscription of their imagination about the social subjugation and economic exploitation of the poor is necessary because the rich fail to see the sufferings and is unable to face the challenges of the country as they get carried with the media image of a successful modern India.

Due to his journalistic background, Adiga enriches the readers with probing perspectives to examine life in the fast changing Indian societies evoking our conscience to "the abject poverty" (Suneetha, 2012, p. 170).

Adiga (2008) addresses specifically the life in the "India of Darkness" (10). It depicts both "the struggle of the underprivileged class" (Kallappa, 2012 p. 232) and how the "the rich people, politicians, policemen and the upper society people are enjoying their lives" (Narasiman, 2013, p. 2). Balram Halwai belonged to "a nameless and birthday-less past" (Waller, 2012, p. 2) and so had to struggle "against the affluent middle-class elites and politicians" (Sheoran, 2013, p 172). Through this novel, Adiga depicted the rich and the poor both in the rural India and in the cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Bangalore. The novel makes the readers see from a journalistic perspective how the recent economic and technological change has not made any difference in the quality of life among the poor, rather the gap between the rich and the poor is growing every day (Shagufta&Qasmi, 2013, p. 1). Through the character of Balram, the novelist tried to show that the poor is always being exploited because of their weak financial strength (Ramteke, 2013, p. 48).

Balram narrated in the novel how he started his life's journey from a poor origin in the village Laxmangarh towards establishing himself as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. In the process, the novel depicts "the feelings, emotions, aspiration, sorrows and the simmering anger and hatred of the till now invisible poor" (Sindhu, 2013, p. 332). The history of oppressions and the present pathetic scenario of the poor of his village are very much explicit in the few questions he asked. These questions also portray his upbringing, "But if we were Halwais, then why was my father not making sweets but pulling a rickshaw? Why did I grow up breaking coals and wiping tables, instead of eating *gulabjamuns* and sweet pastries when and where I chose to? Why was I lean and dark and cunning, and not fat and creamy-skinned and smiling, like a boy raised on sweets would be?" (Adiga, 2008, p. 38). The history of Laxmangarh is the history of the subjugation and suppression of the wealthy class of the society. Balram, one of the members of the oppressed, out of his hatred towards the landlords, gave them metaphorical names as the Wild Boar, the Stork, the Buffalo and the Raven. He believed these animal names appropriately connote the true characteristics of the landlords.

Aravind Adiga gave a vivid description of the school education of the country. Balram started receiving his primary education from his village school. The teacher spotted his potential and gave a formal name to him: Balram. His parents did not feel it necessary to give a proper name to him. They used to call him Munna which simply means "boy". The teacher found him smart and brilliant, and a school inspector appreciated him as a "White Tiger".

However the low quality school education has failed him in developing his latent personality. Although the government is supporting the education, the highly negligent school teacher Mr. Krishna is “stealing the money for the uniforms and the food” (Adiga, 2008, p. 158). Even this school education with “barely equipped with infrastructure” has been “snatched away” from him (Multani, 2012, p. 1041) as he was needed to earn money that the family had spent for the marriage of his cousin sister. In his email to the Chinese Prime Minister, he reflected on his own education, “Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling.... The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. (Adiga, 2008, p. 8).

After describing the tragic condition of the education system which fails to bring salvation to the society, Balram depicted in minute details the inhuman health infrastructures of the country. He narrated, “there is no hospital in Laxmangarh, although there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections” (Adiga, 2008, p. 28). He went on describing how people are suffering as there is no primary health service. Many people, like his father, were going to die because of this. The root of all these miseries was the corruption: “Stories of rottenness and corruption are always the best stories” (p. 30). The hospital itself is dirty, broken, and highly unhygienic. The doctors were busy making money in private practice by bribing the local politicians. There was virtually none to take care of the poor patients.

After the death of their father, life pulled Balram and his brother Kishan to Dhanbad for seeking better job opportunities. Being ambitious and enterprising at the core of his heart, Balram wanted to switch his career from a tea-boy to a chauffeur and he made it a reality with great planning and much sacrifice. He was determined to rise at the top of the society and readily sacrificed for that.

Balram’s long stay and diverse experiences in the house of Mr. Thakur Ramdev, the local landlord, gave the readers an inside view of how the middle-class people dominate the poor in India. In an interview with Lee Thomas (2009), Adiga regarded the novel as an “ultimately mild, middle-class critique.... that question their right to rule India” (p. 1). Although happy in his job and started living a viable life, Balram kept dreaming to become one of the successful persons of the society.

For an immediate rise in the career ladder, he did not mind threatening Ram Persad of exposing his real identity (that he was a Muslim but pretending a Hindu to get a job) and creating trouble for him. The frightened Ram Persad left the job and he became the number one driver of the house. This small development in his career from a tea-boy to the chief driver of a local landlord had ignited his ambition and he was now very much determined to develop himself further. This makes his struggle of life more strenuous and challenging. He had to fight against all the internal and external socio-cultural forces to make him moving in his journey of life and career. So, when he drove Mr. Ashok and his American wife Pinky Madam to his native village Laxmangarh, his family members were very much proud of his success and wanted him to get married. He saw marriage as a chain that will impede his continuous professional growth. He felt alienated in the environment and left his village vehemently.

Balram soon described the political corruptions in rural India. There was the Great Socialist who was supposed to be the champion of the poor and work for their cause but he himself is the center of all corruptions. He takes "four hundred thousand rupees" as a bribe to sell the vacant post of the physician in the local government hospital and does not care if the doctor is at all attending the poor patients in the hospital or not (Adiga, 2008, p. 29). SushilSarkar (2012) appropriately commented, "The future of the country is under the cloud because the power is in the hand of the wrong, stupid, selfish, hedonist, hypocrite and after all upon the murderers. This crooked politician not only create immorality, crisis, anarchy rather they are the creators of the terrorism also" (p. 4). The Great Socialist is the boss of the Darkness for over ten years. Although he wins elections by promising the poor to liberate them from the shackles of the rich landlords, he takes bribe rampantly from the rich to allow them to exploit the land and labor of the poor in the coal mine industry. The degree of corruption and diverse nature of malpractices can be ascertained from the description, "a total of ninety-three criminal cases—for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-running, pimping, and many other such minor offenses—are pending against the Great Socialist and his ministers at the present moment" (Adiga, 2008, p. 57). What is more frustrating is that it is not easy to punish these corrupt politicians "when the judges are judging in Darkness" (p. 57). It is because of the corrupt system of governance that the Great Socialist has "embezzled one billion rupees from the Darkness" (p.58). By depicting life and society in Laxmangarh and Dhanbad, Adiga explores the social injustice, corruption and landlordism in the rural India.

After showing how the rural India is divided between the rich and the poor and how the rich kept themselves aloof from the sufferings of the larger group of the poor as they maintain an autonomous living: "All four of the Animals (the landlords) lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh—the landlords' quarters. They had their own temples inside the mansions, and their own wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed" (p. 16). Adiga depicted that the same division is there in the Indian cities as well. Balram noted how the rich kept themselves aloof from the sufferings of the poor in Delhi, "with their tinted windows up, the cars of the rich go like dark eggs down the roads of Delhi" (p. 77). So, their life is protected from the environmental pollution and the miserable human traffic of Delhi streets. Barbara Korte (2010/2011) appropriately commented that "the rich do not wish to be aware of" the sordid conditions of the poor (p. 299).

The novelist had given a delicate hint of the deteriorated condition of the law and justice in Delhi in the depiction of the hit-and-run accident of Pinky Madam. She, after a heavy drinking at a late night party, adventured to drive herself and inadvertently killed a homeless child sleeping in the road side. This event triggers a lot of tension and confusion exposing the hypocrisies and corruptions of the upper class people and the government agencies involved. Being honest and feeling guilty, she wished to reach out to the child's parents for emotional support and granting compensation but the hypocritical members of her in-laws prohibited her to reach out to the family. They were determined to protect themselves from any judicial punishment and financial losses. For instance, they contacted an advocate Mr. Chamandas Varma of Delhi High Court, to manage the whole affair. He convinced them, "The judge has been taken care of. If your man (Balram) does what he is to do, we'll have nothing to worry about" (Adiga, 2008, p.99). Mr. Ashok's family has made Balram sign an affidavit, written by the advocate, taking all the blame on himself for the killing of the child in that accident. They did not inform him that signing the legal paper means he would be put into jail.

The role of the police is exposed here too. The police came to know about the killer of the innocent child but ignored to bring justice to the family as "no one has reported seeing the accident" (p. 106). When heard about the prospect of going to jail for the forced confession, Balram was tremendously worrying about it.

In his email to the Chinese Premier, he reflected, "The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse" (p. 101). He was also convincing the Chinese Premier that there was no way to come out of the nexus because even the judges may see through this forced confession "but they are in the racket too. They take their bribe, they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And life goes on" (p. 101).

The inhumanity and the social irresponsibility have been exposed through the conversation where Mr. Thakur Ramdev, the father of Mr. Ashok, condemned Pinky Madam for taking initiatives to support the victims: "She's gone crazy" (p. 106). He also warned his son, "You need to control that wife of yours better, son. The way we do it in the village" (p.106). Thus her desire to compensate the family has been sternly rejected.

Balram soon examined why there cannot be any protest from his own family. He believed that the servant class of India is trapped in the Rooster Coop. The result is the self-imposed servitude. Instead of protesting, the oppressed class will actually feel proud in demonstrating the blind loyalty towards their masters. It was because of this blind obedience towards their landlords that the poor are not able to rise above their suppressed condition. Explaining the metaphor rooster coop, Balram said, "The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop...On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher...The roosters ...see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country" (Adiga, 2008, p. 102). Adiga through the metaphor of the rooster coop wished to explore how the rich is trapping the life of the poor for relentless exploitation. The poor were made so busy in struggling for bare survival that they had no time and energy to question the authority of their rulers. In fact, they feel proud of their own servitude. Balram comments, "Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent—as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way—to exist in perpetual servitude" (p. 103). They have been ideologically and repressively so conditioned that if "you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse" (p. 103).



The hegemonic ruling of the landlords was so naturalized and complete that when Balram started practicing yoga to develop himself mentally and physically to rise above the servitude, the other drivers started making fun of him. Balram sadly commented, "The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs" (p. 115).

The novel demonstrated the nature and extent of corruption in Delhi. The story took the readers in the mining business in Dhanbad and how the rich business men like Mr. Thakur Ramdev are earning millions of rupees by cheating the government of taxes. The businessmen, criminals, bureaucrats and politicians are all in the nexus making it an inevitable reality in public life. Balram had, over a period of time, got an inside view of how the ruling class is mutually exploiting the wealth of the nation which should have served the causes of the poor Indians. With the gradual exposure to corruption in Delhi, Balram started getting cynical and dishonest. Feeling how much he has been cheated through corruption, he started resenting the upper class people and looking for a way to avenge himself. Once while driving Mr. Ashok, he reflected, "See—Mr. Ashok is giving money to all these politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay. And who owns that tax, in the end? Who but the ordinary people of this country" (p. 146). Seeing millions of rupees robbed off from the public, he secretly started planning on how to murder Mr. Ashok to rob his money. He himself confessed, "All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him—and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent?" (p. 116).

Adiga has used 'darkness' as a metaphor for corruption in India. The cars, the roads, the times, the people and the places that are involved in corruption had always been described as dark. While driving Mr. Ashok to bribe the government officials, Balram described his journey, "I was taking my particular dark egg (meaning car) right into the heart of the city. To my left I saw the domes of the President's House... When the air pollution is really bad, the building is completely blotted out from the road... It was getting dark when the two brothers came out of the building (after bribing)... Mr. Ashok was dark and sullen when he got in" (pp. 77-78). This repetitive use of darkness for corruption reminds the readers of Charles Dickens' novel *Bleak House* (1853) where Dickens used fog as a metaphor for corruption: "Fog everywhere.

Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city...at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery...." (Ch-1). Compare this passage of Charles Dickens with Adiga's connotative use of smog and pollution as a metaphor for corruption in Indian government: "the President's House was covered in smog and blotted out from the road; it seemed as though there were no government in Delhi that day. And the dense pollution that was hiding the prime minister and all his ministers and bureaucrats..." (Adiga, 2008, pp. 146-147). The result consequent upon this rampant corruption is the lawlessness. Balram described that when India was colonized, people had been in their own cultural cages like the animals of a zoo and there was no trouble among them. But when the British left in 1947 they came out of their respective cages and started looting the resources: "the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies" (p. 38). Over a period of such economic exploitation, social deprivation and moral degradation, the society has got "only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up" (p. 38).

Abhorrent to corruption, injustice, dishonesty, hypocrisy, social irresponsibility, and male domination, Pinky Madam left her husband Mr. Ashok behind to opt for an American life. Alone in Delhi, Mr. Ashok started a debauched life. Balram hated such degradation of his master and felt extremely alienated. He soon realized working with him is not for the best interest of his career. Earlier, he had to take the blame of the hit-and-run accident of Pinky Madam on himself and was made ready to go for jail and now his master was pondering to terminate him from the job. Determined to protect himself from such blind obedience and slavery, one day when got a suitable opportunity, he murdered his master Mr. Ashok and ran away with his cash to Bangalore. Rich with the money of Mr. Ashok, he started a successful business in taxi service.

Adiga's second book, *Between the Assassinations* (2008), a collection of short stories, focuses the "disparities between the poor and the rich, communal disharmony, corruption, violence and hypocrisy" (Nikam&Nikam, 2011, p. 145). Its setting is the time period between the assassination of Indira Gandhi and that of her son Rajiv Gandhi and its location is a small town Kittur in South India.

Kittur is portrayed with a real-life experience with the writer's idealistic imagination making it unique in the contemporary Indian English writing (Mohapatra, 2009). Although it is a small local town, its social milieu represent the diversity of India's culture but "organized around the timeless principle of segregation" (Shivani, 2010) and the characters are "the marginalized, the struggling" youth (Abell, 2009).

Adiga published his second novel *Last Man in Tower* in 2011. Mr. Yogesh Murthy, also known as Masterji, was a retired school teacher. He was the last man in his building who opposed the builder Dharmen Shah's plan of demolishing the old building to construct a new glitzy tower. By analyzing the character of the Masterji, one can see "his commitment to resistance, secure in his belief in the power of cooperative living, impervious to bribes and threats alike" (Clark, 2011). Masterji's resistance to accept the offer of the builder shows how the middle class Indians despite having troubles in their living in the old houses are reluctant to accept modernization.

To conclude, Aravind Adiga in the novel attempted in (re)presenting socio-economic realities of Modern India based on the rural villages and urban slums with a view to help reconstruct India with a more comprehensive development programs. One of the central objectives of this study is to outline the evidences from the text to confute the hyped image of a modern India. This article demonstrates that this image of a modern India simply does not hold water. It has identified how the landlordism, low standard school, unhygienic hospitals, and corruption in police, political leaders, judiciary, bureaucracies etc have been impeding the growth and development of the nation and degenerating the human values of the society.

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