

Exploitation of Human Values in Aravind Adiga's 'The White Tiger'

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Abstract- Aravind Adiga's notable novel, 'The White Tiger' offers a piercing and often skeptical examination of the socio-economic conditions in modern India. This paper argues that Adiga consistently exposes and critiques the systemic erosion of core human values such as integrity, empathy, justice, dignity, and compassion across various levels of Indian society. Through a detailed textual analysis of his novel, this study will demonstrate how Adiga employs satirical, ironic, and starkly realistic narratives to highlight the widespread distortion and commercialization of these values, driven by rampant capitalism, political corruption, and the relentless pursuit of social advancement. By examining the complex interplay between personal ambition and societal pressures, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Adiga's deep engagement with the ethical dilemmas of a rapidly modernizing India.

Keywords- Corruption, darkness, human values, Indian culture, tradition.

I.INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga stands as one of the most prominent voices among contemporary Indian writers. His works compellingly depict the pressing challenges of modern India, including economic disparity, social injustice, political failure, and the systemic marginalization of the underprivileged. Adiga vividly portrays both the neglected rural landscapes and the rapidly developing urban centers such as Bangalore and Delhi. In his narratives, the powerless are consistently pushed to the margins of society, enduring cycles of poverty and exclusion. In today's context, this marginalization reflects broader societal issues, where the oppressed struggle for access to basic resources and full participation in the nation's socio-economic framework. These individuals are often invisible, silenced, and discriminated against based on factors such as religion, caste, education, race, gender, occupation, and economic background. The

protagonist of his novel, Balram Halwai, represents this reality. Born into a poor family in the remote village of Laxmangarh in the Gaya district, Balram was expected to follow the fate of his ancestors as a rickshaw puller, living under the oppressive control of powerful landlords.

The central objective of 'The White Tiger' is to foster a deeper understanding of crimes rooted in social injustice. Traditionally, crime is viewed as a manifestation of immorality and disgrace. However, this novel presents a provocative perspective where acts like murder and theft are depicted as tools for upward mobility—committed without remorse but with purpose. Addressing such entrenched societal issues is no small task. Adiga's narrative offers a raw and realistic portrayal of India's social structure, capturing not only a specific historical moment—when India and China were emerging as global economic forces—but also the broader implications of shifting global economic paradigms and the societal tensions that accompany them. Adiga excels in illustrating the psychological and moral journey of an individual navigating changing social landscapes. His protagonist, Balram Halwai, embodies the complexities of a man torn between vulnerability and ambition, shame and defiance, despair and resilience. The typical Indian, as depicted in the novel, lives under multiple layers of identity, often blurred and interdependent. Poverty remains one such critical layer, deeply embedded in everyday life. Adiga's strength lies in his ability to depict a society in which corruption is both pervasive and normalized. His narrative focuses on the life of an ordinary man, portraying how feelings of deprivation and an insatiable hunger for betterment can propel one toward criminality. Balram's journey reflects the psychological toll of systemic inequality and justifies crime as a desperate strategy for social and economic

liberation. Adiga's characters are vivid and grounded in reality, bringing attention to the aspirations and struggles of those at the lower rungs of society—individuals often used as the economic foundation of nations touted as global powers. While the novel offers compelling insights, it has also drawn criticism from elite circles, particularly for its unflattering portrayal of India's upper class and political landscape. Ironically, Balram himself ultimately becomes part of the very class he once rebelled against, highlighting the inherent flaws and contradictions within the system.

'The White Tiger' delves into the mechanisms of social control through Balram's experiences—his poor wages, exploitative work hours, and the servility expected of India's informal domestic labor force. These workers often lack any opportunity for advancement and endure systemic abuse based on caste, class, and gender. They are scattered, unorganized, and lack the collective bargaining power that industrial laborers might possess, making them especially vulnerable. Yet, Balram emerges as an anomaly, defying expectations and reshaping his destiny. Adiga exposes how the wealthy lawmakers and law enforcement exploit these power structures to their advantage. Through the novel's epistolary format—Balram's letters to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao—the underclass of India finds a voice. Adiga sheds light on the grim realities of caste discrimination, poverty, and the obstruction of merit-based progress. Political corruption and blind belief systems further perpetuate the suffering of marginalized communities. The narrative also captures the widespread rural-to-urban migration driven by economic necessity. Many, like Balram, are forced to leave villages like Laxmangarh due to the absence of basic infrastructure, employment, and opportunities. These dire circumstances compel countless individuals to seek livelihoods in Indian cities, often entering into exploitative work arrangements. Balram's transformation, under such pressures, reflects the lived experience of many in India who dream of escaping systemic poverty but find their paths marred by moral compromise.

Surjit Singh, additionally calls attention to the hard-hitting assault on the degenerate political framework in India: "Not one truthful politician in the whole country. Yes, our parliament is made of thieves, each

one answerable to Prime Minister, who is the biggest thief of them all" (pp. 11).

Absence of reasonable life standards changes a young man into a killer. He has mentally prepared himself to do whatever to further himself. Because of his obscurity, he had no name until his instructor calls him as Balram Halwai. Before being labelled Balram Halwai, he was called "Munna" which implies a small child. His financial constraints forced him to seek work in a refreshment shop. This juvenile employment is definitely the outcome of destitution in *The White Tiger*. In the India of the past, individuals were divided into two classes. They are of low and high classes, a circumstance dependent on birth. Zamindars or landowners still dominate the small towns. With the same feudal class mind set they ruthlessly exploit their superior social position and utilize the services of less privileged classes by using them for inadequate wages and long irregular hours.

Balram possesses an unwavering confidence in his uniqueness, considering himself a 'White Tiger', someone rare and exceptional. He is a person not bound by conventional morals or societal expectations. Although he had to leave school early to work, he continued to educate himself by eavesdropping on conversations and observing the world around him.

Human values in 'The White Tiger'

Aravind Adiga's 'The White Tiger' vividly portrays how deeply ingrained human values are systematically exploited to maintain the oppressive social hierarchy and perpetuate social immobility in India, particularly within the darkness and the Rooster Coop. Balram Halwai, the narrator, offers a cynical yet insightful commentary on this exploitation, revealing how what might be considered virtues in other contexts become tools of subjugation.

The novel asserts that the Indian family is the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice. However, this fundamental value is simultaneously identified as the primary mechanism trapping people in the "Rooster Coop". Masters exploit these bonds by threatening the families of disloyal servants. Balram's own experience exemplifies this: his grandmother, Kusum, pulls him out of school to repay a family loan, crushing his early ambition. She

later constantly demands money, threatening to expose him to his master. The threat of the Buffalo's hired gunmen torturing and killing a servant's family for a son's kidnapping underscores the horrific reality of this exploitation. Balram's eventual "freedom" is not achieved through breaking the "shackles" of poverty alone, but by emotionally severing his ties to his family, performing "last rites" for them as if they were dead to escape their hold and the implicit threats they represent. This highlights how familial love and duty are perverted into instruments of control.

Exploitation of Trust and Honesty:

Balram states that the "trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy". He describes how rickshaw-pullers and chauffeurs handle vast sums of money - a "year's salary, two years' salary" or "a million, two million rupees"—without touching a single rupee. This is not attributed to inherent virtue, but to the fear enforced by the "Rooster Coop". The poor are conditioned to believe that while stealing a small amount (like "a rupee coin or two") might lead to minor trouble, taking a large sum would result in severe retaliation against their families.

Balram's initial honesty is a product of this system, but his transformation into a "The White Tiger" involves deliberately adopting "near total dishonesty, lack of dedication, and insincerity". He begins siphoning petrol, colluding with corrupt mechanics, and even operating his master's car as a freelance taxi. He explicitly states that the more he stole, the more he felt "rage" and understood "how much he had stolen from me".

Suppression of Ambition and Individual Liberty:

Individuals born in the "Darkness" are depicted as having their ambitions stifled from a young age. Balram, despite being identified as a "White Tiger" for his intelligence by a school inspector and promised a scholarship, is pulled out of school due to his family's debt to the Stork. His dream of a "real uniform, and a real education" is crushed.. According to the school inspector, Balram is an intelligent, honest, and vivacious fellow 'in this crowd of thugs and idiots'. Furthermore he calls him, ' the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation "The white tiger." But to no avail in the long run.

The path to social mobility is depicted as virtually nonexistent through legitimate means. Those who do rise, like Vijay the bus conductor turned politician, are said to have "let the politician dip his beak in his backside". To "break out of the coop," a man cannot be "normal" but must become "a freak, a pervert of nature". This suggests that true individual liberty requires a rejection of societal norms and often, immoral acts, as demonstrated by Balram's journey.

Perversion of Justice and the Rule of Law:

The legal and political systems are fundamentally corrupt, serving the interests of the wealthy. Balram observes that "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". Judges are complicit, taking "their bribe" and ignoring "the discrepancies in the case". Police are easily bought and used to enforce the will of the powerful.

When Pinky Madam commits a hit-and-run, Balram is coerced into signing a false confession, with his grandmother's thumbprint also forged as a witness. This demonstrates how the poor's trust in the system, and their family vulnerability, are used to deny them justice. Balram, as an entrepreneur, later uses the same corrupt police force to eliminate business rivals, showing that corruption is not an anomaly but an inherent part of the system necessary for success.

"Mr. Premier, I leave you for tonight with a comment on the shortcomings of police work in India. Now, a busload of men in khaki—it was a sensational case, after all—must have gone to Laxmangarh when investigating my disappearance. They would have questioned the shopkeepers, bullied the rickshaw puller, and woken up the schoolteacher. Did he steal as a child? Did he sleep with whores? They would have smashed up a grocery shop or two, and forced out "confessions" from one or two people." (The White Tiger, pg.no.27)

Absence and Devaluation of Compassion and Empathy:

Genuine compassion is rare and often viewed as a weakness. Mr. Ashok's fleeting attempts at empathy, such as wanting to compensate the family of the child hit in the accident, are dismissed as "craziness" by his

father, the Stork. The wealthy even rationalize the potential death of a child from the Darkness by stating, "You know how those people in the Darkness are: they have eight, nine, ten children—sometimes they don't know the names of their own children. Her parents... won't go to the police". This highlights a shocking lack of empathy and dehumanization of the poor.

Manipulation of Religious and Traditional Values:

Religion is weaponized to maintain the status quo. Hanuman, the half-man, half-monkey god, is worshipped in the Darkness as a "shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion". This religious veneration reinforces a culture of servitude and discourages rebellion. Even fortune-telling machines at train stations reinforce "Respect for the law" as the "first command of the gods," acting as the "final alarm bell of the Rooster Coop".

The Great Socialist, a corrupt politician, uses religious rhetoric and appeals to the poor while embezzling vast sums. Balram himself initially performs acts of piety to impress his masters, but later discards religious artifacts and uses them pragmatically, suggesting a move beyond traditional beliefs.

"You see, 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. Not easy to get convictions when the judges are judging in Darkness, yet three convictions have been delivered, and three of the ministers are currently in jail but continue to be ministers. 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." (The White Tiger pg.no.53)

Dignity and Self-Worth Crushed:

The poor are routinely humiliated and denied basic dignity. Balram's father, a rickshaw-puller, is physically marked by his difficult life, his "spine was a knotted rope". Servants are physically abused (e.g.,

the Stork slapping Balram on the head) and verbally insulted ("half-baked", "monkey"). They are expected to meekly accept their servitude, even being called "sir" by other servants to reinforce the hierarchy.

Balram's narrative is a journey of reclaiming his dignity. His refusal to marry, his bold acts of defiance (like spitting from the Black Fort and later symbolically spitting at God), and his ultimate act of murder, are all presented as his path to becoming a "man" and shedding the indignities of servitude. He learns to assert himself, even if it means resorting to violence and becoming a "sinner, a fallen human".

II.CONCLUSION

Aravind Adiga's contribution to contemporary Indian English literature is undeniable and crucial. He stands apart as a voice of compelling dissent and profound disillusionment, challenging the often-celebratory narratives surrounding India's rapid economic ascent. Unlike many of his contemporaries who might explore identity, diaspora, or cultural hybridity, Adiga zeroes in on the raw, often uncomfortable realities of class disparity, systemic corruption, and the human cost of unbridled ambition. His narratives force readers, both within India and globally, to confront the stark "two India's" – the glittering façade of progress versus the grim reality of widespread exploitation. By giving voice to the marginalized, the subaltern, and those crushed by the system, Adiga performs a vital act of literary advocacy, ensuring that the stories of the unheard are brought to the forefront, compelling a re-evaluation of India's developmental model.

'The White Tiger' presents a chilling exposé of how human values are not inherently good or protective in a deeply corrupt society. Instead, they are systematically perverted and exploited by the powerful to maintain their economic and social dominance, trapping millions in a cycle of poverty and servitude.

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