



IN THE PURSUIT OF BECOMING 'A MAN OF TOMORROW': A STUDY OF ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

ABDUR RAJJAK

Malda, West Bengal

Email– arajjak658@gmail.com



ABDUR RAJJAK

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Abstract

There is always a binary opposition in every field of human life and civilization. The socio- economic field is no exception to this generalization. From the very beginning of human history, we can find the existence of dominant and the dominated groups. One section of people leads a life of luxury by depriving the basic human rights of the others who are treated as merely masses without any human dignity though we are living in the post-colonial world. Identity which is determined by one's caste, race, and economic condition, is part and parcel of an individual's life. The present paper will deal with the exploitation and corruption as portrayed by Aravind Adiga in his maiden novel *The White Tiger*. It presents a pictorial detail of the plight and anxiety of the downtrodden people who, have been at the periphery of the power hub of politics and economy, are striving to earn the means of livelihood. The main focus of the discussion would be the bitter experiences of the protagonist Balram and his 'escape' from the clutches of such brutality.

Keywords: Binary opposition, dominant, dominated, post-colonial world, human right

Introduction

Casteism has always been at the centre of Indian society and has become a part and parcel of one's identity. The origin of this system goes back to the ancient time of Indian civilization. In this regard we may take into consideration the writing of Joti Sekhon who claimed that the caste and economic condition had been largely 'correlated in the past', and this biasness is still an obstacle for 'the economic advancement of the lower-castes' (*Modern India* 49). This question of discrimination is being raised with the advent of democratic sense among the liberal and educated section of the society. As a result, there emerges a new trend of exploration regarding the existence of social discrimination in the contemporary society and its impact on the society as a whole. The analytical

findings of various disciplines including anthropology, history, political science and sociology have indicated that caste is a complex social hierarchal institution which has been retained by current economic and political forces for their own benefit. We may invoke the authority of Dr. B R Ambedkar who once claimed, "Caste system is not merely a division of labor. It is also a division of laborers" (200). It is very relevant factor in the age of market because it licenses the privileged section of the society to exploit and dispossess the underprivileged ones despite the fact that several innovative measures have been adopted to address the issue in view of doing away with the discriminatory barriers. Like some other disciplines, English literature has also witnessed so many writers who are trying their hands to address

the issue from different angles to bring it to the forefront to have a permanent solution to the age-old malpractice. Some of the prominent literary figures in this field are Dr. B R Ambedkar, Urmila Pawar, Kancha Ilaiah, Mulk Raj Anand, Rohinton Mistry, Aruna Gogulamanda, Arvind Adiga etc.

Arvind Adiga was born in modern day Chennai to a well-to-do family and had studied English literature. He began his career as a financial journalist at Financial Times. His articles have also been published in The Sunday Times and The Independent. He is basically known as a novelist. He has achieved fame with his maiden novel *The White Tiger* (2008) and won the honorary Booker Prize in the same year of publication. Since he was experienced enough about those who belong to the lower rung of societal ladder, he was eager to pen them down into his writings. Adiga was very much conscious and cautious about the content he was writing on. In an interview with Book Browse, Adiga talked about the appearance and reality about the Indians. That's why he preferred to rely on research as he says, "I want to make sure I'm not being excessively negative (about modern India)". His writing has a loud and clear message that echoes the words of Martin Luther King, Junior who once claimed, "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood." The present paper will focus on the injustice done on the poorer section by the dominant class to maintain their authority. Besides, it will deal with the inhuman condition of the dominated group of people in the society as depicted in *The White Tiger*. The analysis will be contextual and interpretive simultaneous. At the same time, it will be discussed with the help of social studies, human right studies in the post-colonial context.

Discussion

The novel *The White Tiger* speaks of the Indian society which is basically comprised of the elite and the lower-class of people. The one section enjoys power and luxury whereas the other section is merely treated as masses without minimal human dignity. In other words, the novel is based

on the discrepancy between the world of darkness and that of light. The former one is inhabited by the poor people who cannot even fulfil their rudimentary requirements whereas later one is inhabited by the politicians and businessmen in the lap of luxuries. In fact, gradual and systematic marginalization of one section of society paralyzes it entirely on the long run. The poor have always been the subject to discriminations and exploitations at the hands of the elite class, and their socio-economic condition still remains the same even after so many decades of independence. In this context we may agree with Ram Ahuja who once claimed, "They are harassed, humiliated and discriminated against at every level... are always the targets of attack and hostility by the powerful" (43). He further clarified, "They are rarely considered reliable...thus, lowers their self-image, creates in them a feeling of inferiority and curbs their efforts of gaining means to help themselves" (43). Although we are supposed to live freely in the post-colonial era, its effects are still beyond the reaches of the common people. But the freedom fighters used to think of an ideal society whereby the state was supposed to take care even of the lonely person of the remotest area. To Mahatma Gandhi post independent democratic ambiance of India would be the paragon of justice and equality where "the weakest shall have the same opportunity as the strongest..." (*Harijan*). But this visionary ideal never materialized. The people of the upper caste society have full control over lives and livelihood of the common people, and can crushed their lives in many ways despite we live in the largest democracy. The elite class behaves like the feudal lord even. In the present novel, Adiga has presented this picture in a very realistic way where we find that free movement of the poor people is curtailed by the upper caste people. In fact, Indian socio-economic system is in reality an amalgamation of feudal system and caste system which normalize the exploitation of the dalits at the hands of upper-caste society.

The entire novel revolves around the journey of its protagonist, Balram Halwai from a life of servitude to an established businessman. The entire narrative of the novel is written in letter

form to a Chinese official Premier Wen Jiabao while talking about the scope and opportunity of entrepreneurship in India. The protagonist claims himself to be a wise person who can plan about certain things that are still in the womb of future. He says, "I'm always a man who sees tomorrow when others see today" (*The White Tiger* 192). The story begins in a remote village of Laxmangarh where Balram's family lives at the mercy of the local landlords. Balram's had the potential quality that enabled him to surpass others. Initially Balram did not have a proper name, and his parents used to call him 'Munna'. But one the first day in his school life, he could draw the attention of the school teacher, Krishna. He impressed the teacher with his sincerity and brilliance, and was given the name Balram. Even the School Inspector was so much impressed with Balram; he presented him a book entitled *Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. He appreciated Balram's honesty and intelligence which are very rare in a remote and underdeveloped area, and his existence reminds the Inspector of a white tiger that 'comes along only once in a generation" (*The White Tiger* 35). Henceforth, he has been recognized as 'white tiger', and the present novel is named after this attribute. Besides, it is a sign of power in some of the south Asian countries. It is also associated with individual dignity and freedom.

The oppression and exploitation of the upper class may happen in multiple ways. Sometimes the lower class people are compelled to work a lot for their master in lieu of a small amount of money. In the era of complex world order, there are many ideological tools to oppress the lower class people and it is difficult to find out the means through which the upper class exercises its brutality and deprivation towards the weaker section of the society. The community Balram represents is one of the worst deprived communities in India. The narrator describes it as an area of darkness. Balram realizes that the poor people are loyal and submissive to their masters because of sheer intimidation of the social system which makes them remain voiceless despite their oppression and exploitation. After coming to the extreme point of the enslavement, Balram decides to get rid of the

system by murdering his master Mr. Ashok. Although he knows that his entire family back in Laxmangarh may face fatal end, he decides to move forward with his plan to become a master in lieu of his family.

Unfortunately, Balram was forced to leave school in order to earn money in order to support the family. Initially he and his brother kishan went to Dhanbad to work as assistants to a teashop where he was more interested in conversation of the customers than his duty to serve them. From the conversation he comes to know about driving car in the megacities and thought that it would be helpful for him in gaining more money. After the completion of the training of driving, he was luckily able to manage a job as a driver of Mr. Ashok, a son of local Zamindar. Balram came to learn Ashok's family amasses large amount of wealth through illegal business of coal mining. Therefore, to continue such activities they bribe the ministers so that they can avoid paying income tax. Unfortunately, there appears a bolt from the blue as the family get engaged in conflict with local politician regarding their illegal activities. That's why they are in need to go to Indian capital Delhi to have an appointment with the top level leadership in Delhi. However, it is through them, Balram became acquainted with corruption in every government sector. As a car driver, he used to accompany him everywhere. That's why he knew places and people Ashok visited. He could visualize illegal actions carried out by Ashok. His activities propelled Balram to conclude: "The history of the world of ten-thousand-year war of brains between the rich and the poor" (*The White Tiger* 254).

The novel aims at emancipation of an individual through the paradigm of enlightenment and realization of one's self dignity. The entire narrative of the novel is presented from the perspective of the protagonist himself who talks about several attributes that are conferred on him on various points of life. One of these attributes is 'white-tiger' which can be considered as an alter ego of Balram. This alter ego always haunted him to get rid of dominance of the elite class. When the novel begins we find that he introduces himself as an established entrepreneur of India. His journey to

establish himself to be a successful entrepreneur can be situated in the global context where one can easily discern a fine balance between Indian tradition and the western tastes. Balram's coming out of the realm of darkness and getting in touch with the world of light can be loosely compared with the enlightenment of Lord Buddha. The echo of this comparison can be seen at the end of the text where Balram describes a story related to Lord Buddha to defend himself. The story is about a Brahmin's tricky question whether Buddha was a man or god. At this Buddha replied that, "I am just one who has woken up while the rest of you are still sleeping." In the same way, Balram wants to say that "he has just woken up while the rest are still sleeping" if he is asked by anyone whether he is a 'man' or a 'demon' (*The White Tiger* 190).

Ashok feels the influences of globalization in the markets of India which are now brimming with plenty of shopping malls and trade centres. Ashok recalls the time when there were no trace of luxuries in Gurgaon, a place where buffaloes and farmers were visible. Ashok says, "The main road is full of shopping malls – each mall has a cinema inside! If Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her" (*The White Tiger* 122). He seems to arrange a replica of American ambience which is, in fact, a process of creating a third space in the homeland. This in-between space, to Homi K. Bhabha, "innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (7). This sort of combination of past and present has become very much essential part of his existence which may be one of the reasons for his inability to get rid of the illusions and went on amassing wealth in illegal ways and indulging in illicit relationships. Besides, there is a growing tendency to adopt Eurocentric view of life in every field of life in this era of globalization. Besides, globalization has a positive impact on the lives of the dominated people especially the young ones. A sense resistance and creating their own legacy looming large in them, even they want to make the colonizers compensate the loss the colonizers done to their land. Therefore, the people in the developing countries are very much eager to develop themselves so that their countries exceed

the dominant countries, and lead the world in a better way. But there is also negative side of the globalization in India regarding the condition of the poor people. As has already been mentioned that the poor people in villages are the victim of the feudal mentality of the rich but at the same time they have to face equal lot when they came to the city in the pursuit of greener pasture. Their situation forces them to lead an unhygienic live in the megacity. They make luxurious apartments, malls and other places of entertainment for the rich people while they live in the slums which cropped up behind the large buildings. Since they cannot have nutritious food or cannot afford hygienic living they become the victim of complex diseases like tuberculosis, asthma etc. Their pathetic circumstances have been presented by Adiga in a realistic fashion:

These people were building home for the rich.... The stench of faeces was replaced by the stronger stench of industrial sewage. The slum ended up in an open sewer – a small river of black water went sluggishly past me, bubbles sparkling in it and little circles spreading on its surface. Two children were splashing about in the black water (*The White Tiger* 259-260)

So, we notice that the condition of the poorer section of society remains the same despite revolutionary invention and discoveries of modern science and technology. Besides, politicians don't bother about the moribund condition of the labourers. In fact, they are caught into the eternal chain of pain and suffering like Prometheus of ancient Greek mythology. In other words, their circumstances can be associated with another Greek mythological king named Sisyphus who was punished to move a huge boulder up a hill only to become failure at every attempt.

From the narrative of the novel, we come to know about marital life of Ashok and Pinky which was not a happy one. Both of them are the byproduct of western values. It often appears to them they are misfit in India. That's why Ashok is eager to find a semi-circumstance of the West in Indian capital Delhi. But Pinky Madam did not like

to stay back in India. To her India a dirty place which remains underdeveloped. Initially she was trying to convince herself she would adjust with the modern accessories available in and around Delhi. But she finds some sorts of enthusiasm and curiosity regarding joining Indian politics in Ashok's mind. This enraged her and they often quarreled with each other. Finally she took the decision of moving to the USA. She used to practice a carefree life which enabled her to leave her husband back in India. One certain night she met with an accident while driving a car in a drunkard condition. Unfortunately Ashok begins to pressurize Balram to take the responsibility of the accident. Balram now realizes that there is no alternate left to him other than killing his master Ashok to get rid of the 'rooster coop'. Balram metaphorically uses this symbol in order to highlight the plight of the deprived people. He explains their condition in the following way:

Go to the Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the marketThe roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They 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 White Tiger* 147)

This is exactly happening in the whole country. The poor people have been enslaved both physically and psychologically by the privileged class. Therefore, they are unable to open their mouth against the hegemony.

Adiga also focuses on the psychology of the Indians who are boastful of their so-called glorious past which never existed in reality. But if we take there existed such kind of golden tradition, this shallow pride itself is not useful in any respect. There should have some sort of connection between the past and the present. Being familiarized with the relevance of the past, one should accomplish his duty in that line. This will add some validity to logical point of recalling the past otherwise this is totally nonsense. In this connection we may talk about Pandit Jawaharlal

Nehru who claimed in *The Discovery of India*, "Without that passion and urge, there is...., a slow merging into non-existence. We become prisoners of the past and some part of its immobility sticks to us" (20). Therefore, there must be the enthusiasm and energy to deal with the past and the present in a meaningful way. Unfortunately, there is scarcity of such kind of mental staff in most of the people. They often claim that their forefathers were the predecessors of everything that is available in modern world but the British deprived them of their past heritage and invention in the era of colonialism. This is clear from the following extract:

When you get here, you'll be told that we Indians invented everything from the Internet to hard-boiled eggs to spaceships before the British stole it all from us. Nonsense. The Greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. (*The White Tiger* 173)

Interestingly enough, Adiga does not hold the rich people responsible for the suffering and exploitation of the poor people. To Adiga, their servile mentality is the main reason behind their eternal slavery since they want to remain loyal to their masters despite their basic requirements remained unfulfilled and human rights are often getting violated. Balram satirizes this by saying "...Indians are the world's most honest people" (*The White Tiger* 173).

Balram's rise to be an entrepreneur from the eternal chain of slavery of the upper-class people is, in fact, an onslaught on the conventional concept of labour- master relationship. Though his means of salvation and emancipation do not go by the ethics of any civilized society, his urges and mentality are quite commendable. Certain hidden characteristic features of a section of the rich people are totally exposed to Balram since he is now living with one of such families. Balram notices that in the absence of Pinky Madam Ashok often hires a prostitute or spends night with his ex-girl friend. After observing his moral and ethical degradation, Balram lost his respect towards him, and becomes disillusioned. Although Ashok is

generous towards him, he does not want to see him as an independent person achieving better status socio-economically. At this juncture, Balram realizes that his rights of acquiring both physical and psychological freedom cannot be materialized unless he kills his boss Mr. Ashok. That's why he decides to run away with Ashok's money by murdering him, although he knows that this may be proved to be fatal for him at any moment. In the midst of all the risk, he resolves to advance with the plan to escape by murdering him with the help of weapon made out of the liquor bottle. On day while they went out to bribe a certain politician, Balram pretended that the car had certain mechanical problem, and convinced Ashok to examine the wheel by kneeling down on the ground. By taking advantage of this of this situation, he hit on Ashok's head with that bottle. Then he immediately escaped to Bangalore with bag full of money brought by Ashok from Laxmangarh. In Bangalore, he confined himself in the room for a few days so the fear of being caught by the police over there might be subsided. As the situation seemed to be normal, he starts examining the possibility of doing a business over there. At certain point, he discovered that he would be able to establish himself very soon if he could arrange vehicles to the employees of the IT sectors since there was scarcity of it for the night shift. He immediately launched a taxi company named 'White Tiger Drivers' to bring the IT sector workers home safely at night, and his business proved to be a successful one. By the time, he was narrating the story he became an established entrepreneur of Bangalore.

At the end of the novel, the protagonist is found to establish himself as renowned businessman who defends his heinous crime which violates the fundamentals of humanity. Besides, for the establishment of Balram seventeen of the Halawis had to sacrifice their lives (who were murdered by Ashok's family to take revenge on Ashok's death). Their lives were used as capital or raw-material for the success of Balram in an indirect way. In this way, the story of Balram's success is a study of the human psyche which allows treating an individual as commodity which can, in the age of competitive market, be traded

and risked in the name of business success. Interestingly enough, the family members of Balram were not aware of the murder of Ashok and were not given chance to express their view on it since they belong to subaltern groups who are not supposed to be audible to the privileged since they are thought to be "lethargic, insufficient and burden on the society" (Ram Ahuja 43). There is constant vigilance to check and control their activities. This is what is called panopticon, a concept which was first used by Jeremy Bentham and was illustrated by Michael Foucault in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. According to Foucault, "...the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of Power" (201).

Through this novel Balram expresses his pathetic experiences regarding treatment of the poor people in the hands of the elite section of the society. The rich people are not ready to acknowledge the poor as fellow human beings. They are habituated to use the poor people merely as toilet paper only to cast them aside after the fulfillment of their requirements. To the rich people animal are more valuable than the daily wagers. Balram informs Mr. Jiabao how he was reminded by the watchman to be cautious and careful about the pet dogs of the master. Balram Says, "Then I took them around the compound on chain, while the king of Nepal (Watchman) sat in a corner and shouted, "Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!" (*The White Tiger* 78) This is clearly an insult to a servant and the community he represents. Although Balram comes of a poor family, he doesn't want to die with the baggage of poverty and servitude. He is relentless in his struggle to come out of the cage of eternal slavery. In his determination, we find the echo of Martin Luther King Jr. who once said, "We are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like mighty stream." Various characters roll into one in Balram's character such as – a servant, a murderer, a philosopher and finally a successful entrepreneur. From his childhood he is habituated and known for his thinking out of the box. In order to reach his

goal, he resists various family obligations and responsibilities. He is able to supplant the burden of casteism to become a renowned businessman. Balram possesses some distinguishing characteristics that seconded him to come out of the realm of 'darkness' into the 'light'.

The novel also throws some light on misuse of mid-day meal programme in primary school. According to the scheme, a student is expected to get three roties along with pickle and yellow 'daal'. But none of the students gets it throughout the year accordingly. The allotted amount for mid-day meal is dishonestly taken by the teachers and the local politicians. But the teachers cannot be held responsible for the unholy practice. There should be drastic changes in the entire system of government and its policy. The teachers don't get salary regularly for the inactivity of the system. Adiga has presented the matter in the following tone, "The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money – he said he hadn't been paid in six months....Yet he was terrified of losing his job..." (*The White Tiger* 20). The same thing happens in government undertaken various projects. That's why quality of these works always remains below the standards in the hands of the corrupt people.

In the present novel, the narrator compares India with China regarding their development in economic sector. He finds that there is disparity between the words and deeds of Indian politicians as well as common Indians. People in India often take pride of being the citizens of the largest democratic country in the world whereas its majority of people don't have proper placement or permanent source of income. The politicians scarcely have any care for the people though they talk about justice and equality. Balram satirizes the policies of Indian government which are not sufficient enough to provide its citizen standard ways of living in any respect whereas China is much ahead of India. Although the people in India want to see themselves in competition with China so that India may become the superpower of the world, their endeavour is not satisfactory. It will not be possible unless the basic essential issues are addressed and properly

taken care of. However, in the discourse of his narrative, Balram unconsciously reveals his own hypocrisy in his effort to maintain patrician attitude in his dealing with others while speaks against dominance of the exiting social hierarchy.

However, Balram has been presented as a mouthpiece of Aravind Adiga. Through him Adiga has portrayed the fathomless and agonizing story of affliction and grievance of the poor people and their exploitation which remained neglected and unnoticed by the government. Adiga here implies that the marginal section of the society is still waiting for their upliftment. Everything has certain limits; they should not be expected to tolerate injustice through generations. If suppression against them continues, there may be some violent outburst of it. So, there should be some more effective initiatives by the government authority to investigate how far caste is still affecting the life and livelihood of its citizens. In this connection we may take into consideration the recommendation made by Dr. T S N Sastry,

The strict adherence to human rights alone would end the maladies of the present day world and bring back the glory of respect to humanity and mankind. Only then, it would be possible to claim liberty, equality and freedom of speech and expression the way they have been crafted to achieve the ideals of peace and security to mankind. (85)

In this way the visionary ideals of harmonious society can be attained. Adiga has implied that there is an unfathomable gap between the world of the poor and that of the rich. This is clearly reflected in the words of Balram when he says, "The dreams of the rich and the dreams of the poor – they never overlap, do they?" (*The White Tiger* 225). However, Adiga has not talked about the middle class that emerges at the advent of industrial revolution. Therefore, the present novel is not a real representation of Indian diversity. Andrew Holgate has rightly observed that there is hardly anything in this book which can help it escape scathing criticism. Nevertheless, the novelist makes us conscious of and warns us against the

wrath of these poor people. There should be some sense of respect for and responsibility towards others. Otherwise, the people in the upper rungs of social ladder might face the same lot of Mr. Ashok. In this connection we may quote Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a famous Urdu poet:

If these poor beasts lift up their heads,
Mankind would, then, forget all deeds of rebellion.
If they decide, they can own the universe,
Even chew down the bones of their cruel masters.

Conclusion

The present novel demonstrates the common unconscious of both sections of society who, are either eager to dominate the rest without any care for human dignity or willingly present themselves to serve the dominant class. But at the same time globalization offers a hope for those who want to come out of the trap of servitude. But we must keep in mind that globalization is an extended form of colonial exploitation since it encroaches in the marketplace and livelihood of everyone. Here the third world countries' production cannot compete with that of the developed countries. This is, indeed, a new tool to exploit the people in the third world countries. Above all, the present novel will remain a milestone in the way to make people conscious about their own dignity and individual right. It shows there is still ray of hope for the downtrodden people to have a taste of justice and human dignity. But the yearning for emancipation and self-respect should come out spontaneously from a person and one should have belief in one's own-self to do noble thing. In this context we may mention Gandhiji who once asserted, "If I believe that I cannot do soothing, it makes me incapable of doing it. But when I believe I can, then I acquire the ability to do it even if I didn't have it at the beginning" (Wisdom 495).

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