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Arbind Adiga's 'The White Tiger' : The Voice of the Underclass

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Abstract

Arbind Adiga is an Indian Novelist of 21st century. He wrote an outstanding novel "The White Tiger". It was published in 2008 and won the 40th Man Booker Prize the same year. The novel belongs to the genre of picaresque novel. It presents India's class struggle in a globalized world. We get the socio-economic discrimination in India's economic system, which creates divisions in Indian Society. It limits opportunity, social mobility, health and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all. The White Tiger is a story about how education, formal and otherwise, shapes individuals. The common theme of Indian novels- poverty, corruption, loyalty and issues of Hindu religions and caste find full expression in this novel. The purpose of this research paper is to highlight the voice of the Underclass in the Indian Society- poverty, Hindu religion and prevalent caste system.

Keywords: Social Class, Globalization, Individualism, Freedom, Religion, Poverty etc.

Introduction

India is a democratic country. But, poverty still prevails in India. Majority of people in India are poor. They live in very miserable condition. They have no liberty to do anything. India is a progressive country. Indian economy is developing. But the poor people of India are still below the poverty line. The poor people of Bihar have very little political freedom.

The novel 'The White Tiger' is narrated through letters by Balram Halwai to the Premier of China, who will soon be visiting India.

Balram is an Indian man from an impoverished background, born in the village of Laxmangarh. Early on, he describes his basic story: he transcended his humble beginnings to become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore, largely through the murder Mr. Ashok, who had been his employer. Balram also makes clear that because of the murder, it is likely that his own family has been massacred in retribution.

In Laxmangarh, Balram was raised in a large, poor family from the Halwai caste, a caste that indicates

sweet-makers. The village is dominated and oppressed by the "Four Animals," four landlords known as the Wild Boar, the Stork, the Buffalo, and the Raven. Balram's father is a struggling rickshaw driver, and his mother died when he is young. The alpha figure of his family was his pushy grandmother, Kusum.

Balram was initially referred to simply as "Munna," meaning "boy," since his family had not bothered to name him. He did not have another name until his schoolteacher dubbed him Balram. The boy proved himself intelligent and talented, and was praised one day as a rare "White Tiger" by a visiting school inspector. Unfortunately, Balram was removed from school after only a few years, to work in a tea shop with his brother, Kishan. There, he furthered his education by eavesdropping on the conversations of shop customers.

Balram feels that there are two Indias: the impoverished "Darkness" of the rural inner continent, and the "Light" of urban coastal India. A mechanism that he dubs the "Rooster Coop" traps the Indian underclass in a perpetual state of servitude. It involves

both deliberate methods used by the upper class and a mentality enforced by the underclass on itself.

Balram's father died from tuberculosis in a decrepit village hospital, where no doctors were present due to abundant corruption within all the government institutions in the Darkness. After the father's death, Kishan got married and moved with Balram to the city of Dhanbad to work. There, Balram decided to become a chauffeur, and raised money to take driving lessons from a taxi driver.

Once trained, Balram was hired by the Stork - whom he crossed path with coincidentally - as a chauffeur for his sons, Mushek Sir, known as the Mongoose and Mr. Ashok. Officially, Balram was the "second driver," driving the Maruti Suzuki, while another servant, Ram Persad, drove the more desirable Honda City.

As a driver in the Stork's household, Balram lived a stable and satisfactory life. He wore a uniform and slept in a covered room which he shared with Ram Persad. When Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam, decided to visit Laxmangarh one day, Balram drove them there, and thus had a chance to visit his family. They were proud of his accomplishments, but Kusum pressured him to get married, which angered him since that would cede what he saw as his upward mobility. He stormed out of the house and climbed to the Black Fort above the village, spitting from there down upon the view of Laxmangarh far below.

Balram describes at length the corrupt nature of politics in the Darkness. A politician known as the Great Socialist controls the Darkness through election fraud. The Stork's family, involved in shady business dealings in the coal industry, must regularly bribe the Great Socialist to ensure their success.

As part of these political maneuverings, Ashok and Pinky Madam made plans to go to Delhi for three months. When Balram learned that only one driver would be brought with them, he spied on Ram Persad to discover that the man was secretly a Muslim who had lied about his identity to gain employment. Once his secret was out, Ram Persad left, and Balram was brought to Delhi as the driver of the Honda City.

Balram considers Delhi to be a crazy city, rife with traffic jams and pollution, and with illogically numbered houses and circuitous streets that are difficult to navigate. Ashok and Pinky Madam rented an apartment in Gurgaon, the most American part of the city, since Pinky Madam hated India and missed New York. Balram lived in the servant's quarters in the basement of the building. Teased and ostracized by the other servants, he nevertheless found a mentor in a fellow driver he refers to as Vitoligo-Lips, since the pigment of the man's lips is affected by the skin condition vitiligo. To escape the teasing, Balram chose to live in a tiny, decrepit room swarming with cockroaches.

After a while, the Mongoose returned to Dhanbad, leaving Ashok as Balram's sole master in Delhi. One night, a drunk Pinky Madam insisted on driving the car, and she accidentally killed a child in a hit-and-run. The next morning, the Mongoose arrived and

announced that Balram would confess to the crime, and serve jail time on Pinky Madam's behalf. Balram was terrified by the prospect of going to jail, but was relieved when the Stork arrived and casually mentioned that they had gotten out of the incident through their police connections.

During this time, Balram's political consciousness grows more intense, and his resentment towards the upper class more violent. Much of the novel traces his growth from a meek peasant to an inflamed individual capable of murder in pursuit of his own success.

A few days later, Pinky Madam found Balram and asked him to drive her to the airport. With this abrupt departure, she ended her marriage to Ashok. When Ashok discovered that Balram took her to the airport without informing him, he furiously attacked the driver, who defended himself by kicking Ashok in the chest.

Dealing with the divorce, Ashok began to live a debauched lifestyle, frequently getting drunk and going out to clubs, while Balram cared for him like a wife. Ashok rekindled a relationship with his former lover, Ms. Uma. Their relationship grew more serious, but he remained anxious about telling his family about her. Meanwhile, on his family's behalf, Ashok frequently collected large sums of money in a red bag, using it to bribe government ministers.

Balram's family sent a young male relative, Dharam, for Balram to care for. Dharam is a sweet and obedient companion. One day, Balram took Dharam to the zoo, where Balram observed a white tiger in a cage.

Finally deciding to break free of the Rooster Coop, Balram fashioned a weapon from a broken whiskey bottle, and lured Ashok from the car. He rammed the bottle into Ashok's skull, and then stabbed him in the neck, killing him. He stole the red bag, filled with 700,000 rupees, and escaped with Dharam to Bangalore. In revenge for his actions, the Stork's family likely murdered all of Balram's family, though Balram remains unsure of their exact fate. Nevertheless, he chose to commit the murder knowing this was a likely outcome.

In Bangalore, Balram found great success. He launched a taxi service for call center workers, which he calls White Tiger Technology Drivers. By bribing the police, Balram was able to gain influence and make his business successful. Demonstrating how far he has come, he is able to cover up a fatal accident through his connection to the authorities. He considers himself to be a quintessential entrepreneurial success story that represents the future of India, and presents himself as such to the Premier.

The novel examines issues of Hindu religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. A White Tiger symbolises power in East Asian cultures such as Vietnam. It is also a symbol for freedom and individuality.

Discussion

The Indian Society presents a great gulf between rich and poor. Poors have a dream to be rich. They want to

get food like riches. On the other side, rich persons want to lose their weight. They want to be looked like poor; lean and thin. The White Tiger comments on this particular dream of rich and poor-

"See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like the poor."

The same theme has also delighted P.B.Shelley, a romantic poet and a playwright known for his revolutionary idealism and reformatory zeal. In his play Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant, he writes:

The earth pours forth, its plenteous fruits,

Corn, wood, linen, flesh, and roots-

Those who consume these fruits through thee grow fat,

Those who produce these fruits through thee grow lean.

(Act II, Sc. ii, lines, 9-12)

Indians are not rebels. They suffer silently. They cannot challenge the system. They are exploited knowing all the reasons. We get a thorough picture of India in this expression of the novel:-

"Go to Old Delhi, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundred of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages. They see the organ of their brothers lying around them. They know they are next, yet they cannot rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with humans in this country."

'The White Tiger' presents an accurate picture of poor Indians. Indians are half-starved and half-naked.

"The story of a poor man's life is written on his body in a sharp pen."

The picture of education and poverty in India is evinced in these lines spoken by the Protagonist :-

"Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a pen light, and you'll find an old museum of ideas. Sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (nobody remembers his schooling like the one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the Old Geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio News bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling in the half hour before falling asleep- all these ideas, half-formed and half-digested and half correct, mix up with other half cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with."

The novel talks about the base of Indian Economy. The servants of India are loyal and trustworthy.

"The trustworthiness of the servants is the basis of the entire Indian Economy."

Indians worship many Gods. The tendency of Hindus of being polytheist is well described in the novel:-

"It is an ancient and venerated custom of people in my country to start a story by praying to a higher power."

I guess your excellency that I too should start of by kissing some God's arse."

Which God's arse though? There are so many choices.

See, the Muslims have one God.

The Christians have three Gods.

And we Hindus have 36,000,004 divine arses to choose from."

The idea of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are the ideals of Arbind Adiga for the Indian Society. Like P.B.Shelley in the play Prometheus Unbound, Adiga gives the message of love and liberty and wants them to be kindled in human heart to fight against oppression and all sorts of unjust authority. He dislikes the words 'Slave' and 'Inequality'. Being a champion of poor, Adiga wants all slaves to be free.

He provides a solution to minimize the gap between rich and poor-

"Iqbal, the great poet, was so right. The moment you recognise what is beautiful in this world you stop being a slave. To hell with the Naxals and their guns shipped from China. If you taught every poor boy how to paint that would be the end of the rich in India."

Arbind Adiga wants to establish a civilized society. The dignity of labour, the importance of poor, downtrodden and outcaste should be recognized in order to make the society free from evils. We are human beings. So we should be humanistic in our approach to life. We are a rational being much advanced to the animals. The philosophy of life for the betterment of the society maybe observed in these lines:-

"Let animals live like animals. Let humans live like humans. That's my whole philosophy in a sentence."

Arbind Adiga has highlighted a story of the under privileged society of India. They are compelled to struggle for basic amenities of life. They have no access to food and home. In the modern age, their struggle is pertinent and still going on for the basic hygiene, access to decent facilities for better education and employment. The novelist has provided a multi coloured picture of Modern India, suffering pain, disgrace, poverty and poor conditions of untouchables. The novel is an ordeal of untouchables and poors for self esteem and acknowledgement of the human worth and dignity. This novel has a positive role in bringing about a social change within the framework of the society.

Conclusion

Arbind Adiga portrays realistic and painful image of modern India in his novel 'The White Tiger'. It mirrors the Indian society. It also projects the lives of poor in a realistic manner. The novel analyses Balram's capability to overcome the adversities and cruel realities. The

pathetic condition of poor people struggling hard to make both ends meet is nicely portrayed. The novel is a story about a man's journey for freedom. The Social Justice, violations and religio-socio-political conflicts find full expression. The novel is a great challenge to the ideals of democracy. Democracy is meaningless unless the poor have full control over the instruments of production. Democracy is a great failure if there is poverty, if there is hunger, if there is starvation, if there is anxiety and if there is a fear for tomorrow. Arbind Adiga wishes to establish a classless society in which an individual can't be discriminated on the basis of wealth. As a social reformer, he seeks to construct a just, equitable and humane society.

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