

## Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* : Justifying Crime

VIJAY CHANDRA VERMA

**Abstract.** Written in Indian background, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a severe attack on the existing social, political and financial divisions of society. The novelist's exquisite efficiency of enquiring into the existing divisions of society through the protagonist 'Balram-The White Tiger' unravels the unseen and unexpected India. Balram, the central character, belongs to such a society, dominated by the landlords who have suppressed the freedom and right of the villagers and Balram is one of them. Like a white tiger, Balram is one of the rare of the rarest creatures which come only once in the whole generation. The novel is also a study of the mind of a person like Balram and the study extends the scope of psycho-analytic study of the characters. The way Balram bears the oppressive system creates a slow and staid defying attitude that starts right from as a villager, turning driver then finally a big businessman, and through his life-journey, he learns a lesson that to reach the pinnacle of success and happiness, if one has to commit crime, one should not hesitate and so does Balram by killing the landlord's son, as do other leaders, and officials by doing scams, taking bribes, murdering and so on. The speciality lies in the fact that the issues which Adiga raises are highly sensitive. To deal with such sensitive issues, one requires not only the sensitivity of perceiving the incidents but also the carefulness lest one should fall into unwanted controversy, and Adiga proves his worth in both sensitivity and carefulness in dealing with such issues. Such qualities in his style reserve a very special position in Indian English Literature.

**Keywords :** Social, political and financial divisions; oppressive system; unwanted controversy.

Written in Indian background, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* hammers at the bare, crude, and bitter truth of the devastating and destructive impact of corruption on both individual and society. It brings the sensitive issue of corruption on the world-scenario through the central protagonist, Balram, *the White Tiger*. It shows a two-way flow of such incidents that cause corruption which mutually affects the man and society, and it is because of the mutual devastating impact Balram turns *the White Tiger*; "...the creature that comes along only once in generation..." (Adiga 35). At the same time, it also claims that human society has also direct involvement in fostering corruption, and all of these, as a whole, cause mental aberration which comes to appear in action leading to corruption and then crime. It is "Blazingly savage and brilliant... What Adiga lifts the lid on is also inexorably true; not a single detail in this novel rings false or feels confected. *The White Tiger* is an excoriating piece of work [that] also manages to be suffused with mordant wit, modulating to clear-eyed pathos". (*The White Tiger* cover page)

Adiga's mouth-piece, Balram Halwai is only a rustic fellow belonging to the village, Laxmangarh which he always describes as 'Darkness'. In his letter to Mr. Jiabao, he writes, "You see, I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness"(14). He further adds, "Please understand, Your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of Darkness. The Ocean brings light to my (Balram's) country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river."(14) Balram's thoughts are reflected in his statement which, at the same time, puts a question mark on the schemes and plans of the government. Unbearably bitter but true that a lot of funds are released for development but, these go right into the belly of the leaders. Through Balram, the novelist asserts :

...Ganga called the river of emancipation, and hundreds of American tourists come each year to take photographs of naked *sadhus* at Haridwar or Benaras, and our Prime Minister will no doubt describe it that way to you, and urge you to take a dip in it. No!-Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids.(15)

Balram wanted to continue his studies but the wants of life and social system never let him do so. He is the victim of none but of the system which disrupts everything. A boy, named, Munna of Laxmangarh, is filled up with innocence but the corrupt system defiles his soul. Most of the villagers had to work like bonded-labourers in the fields of the four landlords- The Buffalo, The Stork, The Wild Boar, The Raven. They have been characterised as animals for they have no feelings for the poor, the deprived and the destitute. "All of the four animals lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh—the landlords' quarters."(25)

The novel reflects an unbridgeable gap and divisions—the rich and the poor or the capitalist and the exploited. It also points out the fact that it is the tyrannical over-dominance, exploitation and unleashed flow of corruption that led to the birth of naxalism. "The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen." (27), and then the man is compelled to do something against law and system. The miserable condition of school-teachers forces them to do such illegal things against law to survive their families. Balram has been one of the witnesses of such an incident. In his letter to Mr. Jiabao, he describes:

There was supposed to be free food at my school—a government programme gave every boy three rotis,

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yellow daal and pickles at lunch time. But we never ever saw rotis, or yellow *daal* or pickles, and everyone knew why: the school-teacher had stolen our money.

The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money— he said he hadn't been paid salary in six months. (33)

Balram could be anything—a doctor or an engineer or at least a 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade service-holder. He was studious and bright but he became a driver. The load of loan taken from the Stork makes him and his family helpless and he has to work in a tea-shop to pay it over. However, his intelligence is marked by the school-inspector who gives him the name the White Tiger(35). At every step, he becomes the victim of corruption. His father, being a rickshaw puller, was a self-respectful man who never begged alms. Unfortunately, he suffers from T.B. and starts spitting out blood. Balram and his brother Kishan take him to 'Lohia Universal Free Hospital' across the river but the condition of hospital, itself, was diseased :

There were three black goats sitting on the steps to the large, faded white building; The stench of goat faeces wafted out from the open door. The glass in most of the windows was broken; a cat was staring out at us from one cracked window.(48)

The real twist in Balram's life comes when he becomes a professional driver. Time takes him to the Stork's house where he gets a job of second driver-cum-cook through buttering his would be masters. Aravind Adiga portrays him with bold words and characterizes him as one resistant to corruption. He worships his masters as parents. Each word is like the command of God and without having a second thought, he materializes the order. His experience as a boy very soon makes him feel that, "... in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up."(64)

The Stork, being the landlord, has capacity to buy anything, and this is what we see when his candidate wins the election on fixed votes. People are not aware of the power of their vote. "Like eunuchs discussing the kamasutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh."(98) The Stork is ascertained of preparedness of election, " Now the rallies were done. The priest celebrated a special pooja to pray for the Great socialist victory; mutton biryani was distributed on paper plates in front of temple; and in the evening, there was free booze for all."(100)

Thus, his candidate, Vijay, the bus conductor emerges victorious. Now, The Stork had an easy approach to him and he could play the game of corruption even more conveniently. Balram's desire to become the first driver is fulfilled when he comes to know that Ram Persad was originally a Muslim and he was doing the job under a fake identity :

Now this Mohammad was a poor, honest, hardworking Muslim, but he wanted a job at the home of an evil, prejudiced landlord who did not like Muslims-so just to get a job and feed his starving family, he claimed to be a Hindu! And took the name of Ram Persad. (109)

Mohammad leaves the job, and hence Balram overtakes the position, and his long cherished dream to drive Honda City comes true.

Balram comes to Delhi with his new master Mr. Ashok and his wife, Mrs. Pinky. They settle down there in Gurgaon. He gets a new circle of drivers. Mukesh whom Balram calls Mongoose comes often to Delhi. Mr. Ashok and Mrs. Pinky are kind to him but the Mongoose treats him as a servant. The Mongoose is always on his heels to manage with officials and politicians whom he pays a lot of bribe for the fair running of his unfair coal business. In the country of Gandhi, the illegal business and illegal income are done at the cost of Gandhi's ideals. While on his way to a minister, Mr. Ashok says to the Mongoose, "We're driving past Gandhi, after just having given bribe to a minister, It's a fucking joke, isn't it". (137) Bribing politicians and officials is the bare and bitter truth of the business, and the Stork and the Mongoose knew it very well. It was a regular requirement of the illegal business. Balram, too, becomes habituated of this. His living-standard is raised and he starts taking liquor and going to red light area though only once or twice.

However, Balram cannot remain unaffected in the atmosphere of corruption. He was getting changed in the atmosphere of town-life, though he was the least aware of it. He had come to Delhi as an innocent man but turned a sly. He could see "everyday, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffeur is driving an empty car with a black suitcase. Sitting on the backseat, inside that suitcase is a million, two million rupees; more money than chauffeur will see in his lifetime. If he took the money he could go to America, Australia, anywhere, and start a new life. He could go inside the five star hotels he has dreamed about all his life which he has only seen from the outside. He could take his family to Goa, to England. Yet he takes that black suitcase where he is meant to and never touches a rupee, why?"(174) Such restless thoughts go on in his mind over and again. After a lot of introspection, he justifies what goes on in his mind :

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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 - you! (244)

Ultimately, his association with corrupt people makes him like one of them. Being overwhelmed with such corrupting thoughts, once having an appropriate occasion, he murders Mr. Ashok on the highway while the latter was checking the tyre of the car. In his letter to Mr. Jiabao, he describes:

I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains. It's a good, strong bottle, Jonnie Walker Black-Well worth its resale value. The stunned body fell into the mud. A hissing sound came out of its lips, like a wind escaping from a tyre. (284)

He runs away with his nephew, Dharam to Bangalore and settles down there, where he bribes the police-officer and opens his own transport business-'We Drive Technology Forward'

The most striking fact of his present fiction is that Adiga justifies it, keeping in view the compulsion and demand of time and situation. Balram's mental aberration is the outcome of the naked truth – The rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. Balram was, actually, 'Munna'- innocent, true, and pure at heart. But time changes and he is tempted for corruption. The journey which he covers from his village to Delhi and then his success in establishing his own company is the outcome of his own experience which he gained in society. Really speaking, the change of position from a servant then to philosopher, to entrepreneur, and finally a murderer is the outcome of the rampant corruption in society. The unequal division in society-the rich and the poor-the oppressor and the oppressed-the ruler and the ruled-the landlord and the labourers- the capitalist and the exploited- creeps into his mind and brings him to wrong path of life. He didnot want to murder his master, Mr. Ashok but the uneven difference compelled him to murder. He expresses his thought and justifies the murder :

Why not? Am I not a part of all that is changing this country? Haven't I succeeded in the struggle that every poor man here should be making the struggle not to take the lashes your father took, not to end up

in a mound of indistinguishable bodies that will rot in the black mud of Mother Ganga? True, there was the matter of murder-which is a wrong thing to do, no question about it. It has darkened my soul. All the skin-whitening creams sold in the markets of India won't clean my hands again. But isn't it likely that everyone who comes in this world, including our Prime Minister (including you, Mr. Jiabao) has killed someone or other on their will put up bronze status to you near Parliament House in Delhi-but that is glory, and what I am after. All I wanted was the chance to be a man-and for that, one murder was enough. (318)

Aravind Adiga's approach and style are at their best. He hits on the point which appears highly complex, disturbing, shocking but true. He succeeds in dealing with a very sensitive and controversial issue without causing any controversy. It gives his art of presentation, a universal appeal which gives the novelist a very distinct position in the world of fiction. Hence, his work is par excellence and noteworthy one when he, very aptly and substantially, justifies crime. His creative approach gives a very new angle to look upon an action giving wider scope to literature for further analysis and research.

**Vijay Chandra Verma**

Research Scholar, Dept. of English  
Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribagh (Jharkhand)  
E-mail : verma.vijay329@gmail.com

**Work Cited**

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