

## **Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* : The Dream of a Subaltern**

**Kishwar Jahan Begum**

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger* has not only earned him the prestigious Booker Prize in 2008 but also established him as a socio-politically conscious literary artist. *The White Tiger* highlights the ever widening gap between rich and poor, rural and urban, and the brutal reality of an economic system that allows a small minority to prosper at the expense of the silent majority. The main aim of Adiga is to highlight the need of India's poor, the unhappy division of social classes into haves and have-nots, the power kegged anger that seethes among the world's dispossessed. With this aim in mind, Aravind Adiga's razor-sharp debut novel explores, with wit and insight, the realities of the two Indias - India in Darkness and India in Light. It reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of others.

In the realm of literature, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak holds a very important place. She is best known for the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" in which her answer to this question is "No" (Spivak 309). She further clarifies that when a subaltern speaks he/she is no longer a subaltern. Spivak's argument is related to speech but apart from speech, there can be other means of expression. As such, the novel can be considered to be a manifestation of the hidden desires, the dreams and aspirations of the bullied, uneducated, underprivileged have-nots who still live often in shocking deprivation. The creation of his protagonist has been inspired by the poor of India, Adiga met while travelling. He had once said that the novel's protagonist was partly inspired by a rickshaw puller who told him, "you've listened to me, but when you go back to Delhi, you will forget about me... I did not forget about him". (Hasan 5) In an interview with Di Martino, Adiga had said :

Many of the Indians I met while I travelled through India blended into Balram, but the character is ultimately of my own invention. I wanted to depict someone from India's underclass... my aim was to draw aspects from the people I'd met to create someone whom I see all around me in India ... Someone whose moral character seems to change by the

minute - trustworthy one minute, but untrustworthy the next, who would embody the moral contradiction of life in today's India. (Di Martino Interview)

*The White Tiger* records the story of Balram Halwai, the oppressed and dominated man who lives in Laxmangarh situated in the darkness of India. Laxmangarh is always addressed as the darkness and there only poor people lived who worshipped Hanuman because, "he is shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love and devotion" (*The White Tiger* 19). The pivotal character of the novel is Balram Halwai, who lives in Adiga's imaginative village, Laxmangarh, where the villagers, family and friends are subjected to exploitation, torture and torment by the village landlord. Balram, who is ambitious by nature, tries to improve his condition. This desire took him to Delhi where he started his life as a driver of one of landlord's westernised sons, Ashok. Delhi is the place where Balram feels the great gap between rich and poor and between two castes, the men with big bellies and the men with small bellies, those who eat and those who are eaten. Balram's life is an example of "the story of how a half baked fellow is produced" (11). He even calls his life story "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian" (10). We find a well balanced combination of fable and reality in *The White Tiger*. It is a tale of plight and gust of violent revolt of Balram Halwai, a poverty-stricken servant belonging to 'Subaltern Class' of a typical Indian feudal village. According to Marx, the society can be categorised in two functioning groups – Bourgeois and Proletariats - exploitative and exploited. Adiga has converted these two notions as men with big bellies and men with small bellies - the rich and the poor, those who eat and those who are eaten.

Balram Halwai, belonging to a poor village family is the White Tiger in the novel. As a white tiger is a rare creature in the jungle, so is the village boy, who can read and write, in the village school. The thread which binds the novel is in the form of letters which our hero writes to the Chinese Premier, whose state visit to India is impending. Adiga gives a reason for the epistolary form in which the novel is written. He says :

It is a story he can never tell anyone because it involves murder in real life; now he tells it when no one is around. Like all Indians, who are obsessed (a colonial legacy, probably) with the

outsider's gaze he is stimulated to think about his country and society by the imminent arrival of a foreigner, and an important one. So he talks about himself and his country in the solitude of his room. (The Sunday Times, April 6, 2008)

The novel is a series of letters written over the period of seven nights. Through these letters, Balram narrated the whole story of his life from rags to riches. He tries to apprise the statesman of the true condition of the globally shining India, the sheen of which can be rubbed off easily. *The White Tiger* describes an India far removed from the colourful costumes and music of the Bollywood films and mystical enticements of tourism promotions. This India is seething network of people locked into a social framework that promote injustice and class segregation.

Balram, a low caste young boy, is subjected to various types of oppression and exploitation, first, by his affluent rich elite class landlords in the 'World of Darkness' as Laxmangarh, his native village, and then in the 'World of Lights', in Delhi, by his master. Balram was a smart lad, and that was even recognised by a school inspector, who praised him as a White Tiger. He said, "In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals - the creature that comes along only once in a generation. That is what you are, in this jungle".(35) The school inspector even promises to arrange a scholarship and proper schooling for the young boy, but his family takes him out of school and puts him to work at a tea-shop, smashing coals and wiping tables as part of the conditions of a loan his family had taken from one of the village landlords to meet the expenses of his cousin's wedding. By shrewdly listening to the conversation of customers, Balram gathered that his best option was to become a driver, an ambition he persistently pursues. Balram got his break when a rich man, his village landlord, hired him as a driver for his America returned son, Ashok. As he drives his master to shopping malls and call centres, Balram becomes increasingly aware of immense wealth and opportunity all around him. Balram's real education to penetrate the restricted domain for subaltern began when he starts to acquaint himself with metropolitan city and its life style. Through these experiences, Balram learns much about the world and later states that the streets of India provided him with all the education he needed. In his attempt to educate himself to subvert the bourgeois ideology, he has to tolerate a lot of humiliation and exploitation that he is subjected to by Pinky Madam, "You are so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, and

look at your clothes! There is red paan all over your teeth; and there are red spots on your shirt. It is disgusting! Get out! Clean up the mess you have made in the kitchen and get out" (146). There are other instances too, that added fuel to fire. Balram is chided by the Nepali King when he handles brutally two pomerians in Chains, "Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!" (78). This comment shakes Balram's inner consciousness and accelerates his rapacity to get success in his life at any cost.

A vision of the city changed his life for ever and he started wishing to be a part of modern India. His learning curve was very steep and in no time, he became aware of the fact that the way to the top is the most expedient means even if it involved committing the odd crime of murder. He persuaded himself that it was what successful people must do. His story reveals a shocking disregard for the sanctity of human life and basic human rights, by individuals at all levels of society. He writes :

... in the old days when 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)

Adiga explained the contrast between the rich and the poor with the reference of history :

.... the history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand year's war of brain between the rich and the poor. Each side is eternally trying to hoodwink the other side : and it had been this way since the start of time. (254)

The dreams of the rich and that of the poor never overlap because the poor dreams to eat enough of nutritious food and look like the rich, on the other hand, rich goes on dieting, losing weight to look like the poor. This is the irony of this world. In cities, the people from darkness construct the giant buildings for the rich to live in and themselves live in the tarpaulin sheets and partitions into lanes by lines of sewage.

The story unfolds the way Balram broke out to his new found freedom from a caged life of misery through crime and cunningness. It is a reflection

of contemporary India, calling attention to social justice in wake of economic prosperity. It is a novel about the emerging new India which was pivoted on the great divide between the haves and have-nots with moral complications. Everyone thinks he should do what was written on his forehead but a fire in him turns and moves him away from the established path of penury and servitude. It is a fact that India is a land of chicken coops. The chicken can move freely two inches to the right and two inches to the left. If any chicken dares to poke its head out of the coop the chicken's family pull the stupid chicken in. Once in a while there comes a daring chicken that thinks to be out of the coop. *The White Tiger* is about the chicken coop and a certain chicken that turns into a White Tiger. The key metaphor in the novel is of the Rooster Coop. Balram was caged like the chickens in the coop. He, being a White Tiger, had to break out of the cage to freedom :

Go to old Delhi, behind the Jama  
Masjid... roosters in the coop smell...  
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.  
(173-174)

Balram finally decides to become a big bellied man. When he planned meticulously how to murder Ashok and snatch his huge money bag, he got out of his Rooster Coop and took a plunge into the entrepreneur's world.

All the social, political and economical disparities gradually inculcate in Balram's mind, the spirit of revolt, resistance and vengeance, which remained suppressed for sometime in Balram's unconscious mind. His father's plan or cherished dream for his son might have inspired him constantly to resist and improve his subaltern condition. Talking about his father, Vikram Halwai, he says, "Rickshaw puller, he may have been a human beast of burden - but my father was a man with a plan. I was his plan". (27) His father, who has been living like a donkey, wishes that at least one of his sons should live like a man. He said, "My whole life, I have been treated like donkey. All I want is that one son of mine... at least one should live like a man". (30) Balram dreams and then dares to enter the restricted domain created by oppressors, revolts and gets success and recognition at any cost. Thus, he gives voice to his oppressed, abused and exploited brethren. The representation of Balram's status in the beginning

of the novel is like subaltern destitute, but when he accumulates wealth, he becomes like a landlord, a position which was ideologically and socially restricted for him. He achieved his higher status through manipulation, murder and acquisition of wealth. He showed his countless brethren, the depressed, the oppressed and subjugated ones, the way to the top. He gives voice to the hushed silence of those silenced people and also hopes that even half baked can have light in their life. Thus, the story of Balram expresses the optimism that the lot of low class will change and they will become the makers of their own destiny. We can say that when he visited the National Zoo in Delhi, he noticed the white tiger in the enclosure, he felt like being hypnotised by the tiger that energised the criminal in him to be blood thirsty and took law into his own hands. The more he was educated, the more he became corrupt. The experience was exhilarating for him, "I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant". (321)

The one ultimate dream of Balram is to open a school, so that good education can be imparted to children. He wants that these children should become 'White Tigers' of tomorrow because he needs many more white tigers if he has to bring a change in the present day society. By the end of the tale, Balram has his own business in Bangalore, a place far from his own origins. He owns a taxi fleet and has secured the financial umbrella shade in which budding entrepreneurs like Balram may shelter and prosper. Thus, he eases himself a rung or two up the social and economic ladder. If only the elevation might have happened without treading on others...

### **Works Cited**

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi : Harper Collins, 2008.

Di Martino, Nick. "Interview with Aravind Adiga," October 6, 2008, Jan 2012  
<<http://university bookstore. blogspot.com/2008/10/nick-interviews-aravind-adiga.html>

Hasan, Suroor. "Adiga : Protagonist Partly Inspired by Rickshaw Man", Hindu, London, October 16, 2008.  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_White\\_Tiger](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_White_Tiger)

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Ed. Lary Grossberg and Cary Nelson, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

The Sunday Times, April 6, 2008.

*Associate Professor, Department of English, G.B.M. College, Gaya*