

Unshackling the Rooster Coop : An Analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract. *The White Tiger* (2008) is Aravind Adiga's first novel, for which he got Booker Prize. It depicts the most heartrending picture of imbalances in Indian society. Adiga depicts both the downtrodden, unpleasant deprived places like Laxmangarh and highly developed places like Gurgaon and Bangalore. As usual the marginal are kept at the ridge or periphery of the power centre. They always suffer for their daily bread and butter. In present context marginality is used to analyse socio-cultural, political, economic spheres, where deprived people struggle to gain access to resources and full participation in social life. Marginalized people are usually discriminated, ignored and often suppressed on the basis of race, gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economy by the mainstream. This order results in the paralysis of one side of the society as Balram, his family and community is paralysed in *The White Tiger*. So throughout the novel, these marginal people hunt for their identity, social value and economic balance. Through this novel the paralysed part of the society is shown struggling for the socio-economic equality. Only a few daring, risk taking and sharp minded individuals like Balram are able to break the vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and social marginalization.

Keywords : The white tiger; marginalized; rooster coop; Breaking out; unshackling.

The White Tiger is framed as a narrative letter written over seven nights to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao; it is a tale of servitude, revolt and murder. The novel employs a first person narrator, Balram Halwai, whose unique sarcastic voice carries the reader through his life in "new India". Balram writes a letter in response to a statement he heard on the radio, "Mr. Jiabao is on a mission, he wants to know the truth about Bangalore". Balram is an expert on the truth about the harsh realities and hidden cruelties of India. The novel presents a startling contrast between India's rise as a global economy and the plight of the marginalized class of society living in devastating rural and urban poverty through Balram Halwai, the narrator and protagonist. Balram who belongs to Laxmangarh, in Bihar, is a son of a rickshaw puller. In spite of being an intelligent and promised child, he is forced to leave the school at an early age and works in a small tea-shop where he has to break coal in order to support his family. He learns driving also as a side job.

Then, he gets a chance to meet the rich landlord and powerbroker, named 'The Strok', who appoints him as a chauffeur to drive a luxury car of his USA returned son, Ashok, settled in Gurgaon, near New Delhi. There he often drives his master

and his wife to various shopping malls and marts and is exposed to the glitter of the shining and rising India. He becomes aware of the immense wealth, corruption and opportunity all around him realising at the same time that he would never be able to reach there. He contemplates over his situation and realises that there is only one way through which he can achieve his target and that is by joining the bandwagon of the affluent class of the society. Only then he can become a part of this rich and influential world.

It is only by murdering his employer, Ashok, that he can get away with his penurious and dark life. He takes advantage of his master's faith and trust and kills him with an empty whisky bottle and along with his cousin Dharam he escapes to Bangalore. There he changes his name to Ashok Sharma, and starts a taxi company from the money he had taken after murdering his master. He becomes a wealthy entrepreneur of India's most technologically advanced metropolitan city.

Negating Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept that "Subaltern cannot speak", Adiga made Balram speak as a rebellious subaltern youth who adopts a criminal method like typical psychopath in order to come out of the "rooster coop". The novel's theme is very well justified through the title "*The White Tiger*" which symbolises a rare species just like the protagonist of the novel who dares to make his destiny in society of the rich and powerful. Though Balram was himself a subaltern and very much a part of the "rooster coop" but still he manages to unshackle it, though by illegal and brutal means.

Adiga has used the haunting imagery of the "rooster coop" to describe the extreme poverty and deprivation resulting in utter helplessness of the marginalized people. Through his protagonist Balram he explains :

Go to old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, shitting just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark 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 very same thing is done with human beings in this country.

(Adiga 173-174)

The question arises as to why people are forced to act like a rooster waiting for its turn to be cut into pieces. Why do not they rebel? Why don't they try to unshack the chains that bind them to this pathetic condition? The answer is extreme poverty and lack of educational opportunity.

Talking about inhuman conditions of Dalits in society, the great social reformer and thinker of nineteenth century, Jyotiba Phule writes about the vicious cycle in which they have been trapped since centuries and generations. It started with denial of educational opportunities to the dalits. Uneducated dalits were thought fit only for lowly jobs and for this they were lowly paid. As they were uneducated they didn't have skills for their economic upliftment. As a result, they couldn't provide proper nourishment or education to their kids. So the next generation and generations afterwards remained undernourished, uneducated and extremely poor. It was almost impossible for the dalits to come out of this vicious cycle of extreme poverty, illiteracy and social discriminations.

Similar is the situation of Balram Halwai. He comes from such a marginalized uneducated poor family that was not even named properly. His teacher had named him Balram. Being sincere in his studies, Balram is always praised by the school teacher. The school inspector also gets impressed by him and presents a parting gift, a book entitled *Lessons for young Boys from the life of Mahatma Gandhi*. He praised Balram calling him intelligent, honest and vivacious fellow in the crowd of thugs and idiots :

In any jungle, what is the rarest of the animals. The creature that comes along only once in a generation?
I thought about it and said, 'The White Tiger'; That is what you are in this jungle (35)

Though he was honest and intelligent in his activities, but, as usual poverty and depravedness of his family doesn't permit him to complete his education. He is forced to leave his school and join tea shop with his brother, Kishan. He undertakes job like coal crusher and table sweeper. However, unsatisfied with his earnings, he also learns driving. Ashok employs him as a driver, treats him well. But ultimately Balram kills him, steals his money and becomes an entrepreneur. He is a rare specie, 'The White Tiger', that is why he is able to unshackle the chains that had bound him to poverty and lack of opportunity for educational and economic upliftment.

Thus an analysis of *The White Tiger* suggests that the marginalized like Balram Halwai can only break out of the rooster coop by adopting illegal means like murdering and robbing someone. However, when we look at the Indian society after independence, this analysis seems to be a half-truth.

With liberalization, globalization and rapid technological advancement, economic disparities have been increasing. The world is moving towards knowledge society, where people without quality education and skills are being marginalized. However, democracy and economic liberalism also support meritocracy that is why Barak Obama, a half black became the President of America, which has a long history of racial discrimination. Similarly in India numerous individuals from very humble families have reached the highest position in their respective fields. Ms. Mayawati, coming from a very humble dalit family became the Chief Minister of U.P, the most populous state of India.

Mr. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India belongs to teli caste, almost similar in social status to Halwai caste, to which Balram belongs. In Gaya itself, where Adiga has based his novel there is a locality called 'Patwa Toli', where most of the residents are from poor weaver families, every year 40-50 students clear toughest engineering exams like IIT and NIT etc. Few kilometers from Gaya, in Patna, students of 'Super 30', run by Anand Kumar, clear toughest exams in India. These students like the students of "Patwa Toli" come from extremely poor families. They overcome all odds by dint of their sheer hard work and reach the highest echelons of the society. The 'Dalit Chambers of Commerce', a group of dalit entrepreneurs is another such example. All of them are white tigers.

Thus we can say that many Balram Halwais are unshackling the chains of poverty. Some, like the protagonist of the novel by using illegal means and others by their extreme focus and hard work. However, the novel certainly makes us think about millions of those who are unable to break out of the rooster coop because of poverty, lack of education and social marginalization.

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Work Cited

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