

Thirst for freedom in Aravind Adiga's white tiger

Rejiraj S

Lecturer, Department of English Santhom Malankara Arts and Science College, Edanji, Kerala, India

Abstract

In *The White Tiger* Aravind Adiga pictures India as of nearly feudal society disguised in democracy. The country might have gained its independence from the British at the end of the 1940's, but the majority of the people in India are still trapped in servitude. *The White Tiger* is a depiction of the social and economic inequalities of contemporary India. On the whole it is a penetrating piece of social commentary, attuned to the dissimilarities that persist despite India's new prosperity. Though the ending is not a perfectly happy ending, it seems hopeful. Balram makes it out of poverty. But he does not become desensitized and distanced from where he came from. This allows him to act morally more often.

Keywords: freedom, corruption, third world countries

Introduction

Freedom is an innate right which humans have since their birth. Freedom is not something that can be touched, seen, felt or reached, thus it gives a vague idea about freedom. Different people have different opinion, definition and thoughts about the idea of freedom. Some talk about freedom in a political sense, some talk about social freedom, some about personal independence and some define it as religious freedom. But the fact of being free, holds as a true want in every all cases. Freedom is the choice to live one's life doing what one wants to do, live where one wants to live, eat by own choice and learn what one's heart desires. This means that freedom can apply to different aspects of life and freedom, but is not an absolute term.

Thirst for freedom

The White Tiger is the debut novel by Indian author Aravind Adiga talks about compelling, angry and dark humorous man's journey from Indian village life to entrepreneurial success. As Michael Portillo, chairman of the judges of Man Booker Prize said.

In Many ways it was the perfect novel;. The judges found the decision difficult because the shortlist contained such strong candidates. In the end, *The White Tiger* prevailed because the judges felt that it shocked and entertained in equal measure. The novel undertakes the extra ordinarily difficult task of gaining and holding the reader's sympathy for a through going villain. The book gains from dealing with pressing social issues and significant global developments with astonishing humour. Portillo went on to explain that the novel had won overall because of its originality. He said that *The White Tiger* presented a different aspect of India and was a novel with enormous literacy merit (Michael Portillo)

The novel provides a dark humour perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from the protagonist, Balram Halwai, a village boy to the Chinese premier His Excellency Wen Kiabao during seven nights. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a Chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then in Bangalore, the place to which he flees

after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India. Ultimately Balram transcends his sweet maker caste and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding the history of Poverty and Underdevelopment, he represents as he himself says "tomorrow". (319)

Adiga says in an interview,

At a time when India is going through great changes and with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did the 19th century and as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do-it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self – examination. (Jeffries)

The main theme of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is that the rich people, politicians, policemen and the upper society people are enjoying their lives with the help of the poor people, who are still under crushing poverty. Introducing a major literary talent, *The White Tiger* offers a story of flashing wit, blistering suspense and questionable morality told by the most volatile, captivating and utterly narrator, that this millennium has yet seen. Balram Halwai is a complicated man, servant, philosopher, entrepreneur; murderer over the course of seven nights, by the scattered light of preposterous chandler, Balram tells the terrible transfixing story of how he came to be success in life, having nothing but his own wits to help him along. Born in the dark heart of India, Balram gets a break when he is hired as a driver of his village's wealthiest man.

The White Tiger of the novel is Balram Halwai, a poor Indian villager whose great ambition leads him to the Zenith of Indian business culture, the world of the Bangalore entrepreneur. On the occasion of the president of China's impending trip to Bangalore, Balram writes a letter to him describing his transformation and his experience as driver and servant to a wealthy Indian family, which he thinks exemplifies the contradictions and complications of Indian Society. Balram moves to New Delhi with Ashok and his wife Ms. Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New

Delhi, Balram is exposed to the extensive corruption of India's Society, including the government. In New Delhi, the separation between poor and wealthy becomes ever more evident by the juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers. One night Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family decides to frame Balram for the hit and run case. The police tell them that no one reported a child missing so that luckily no further inquiry is done. Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government itself. Having being humiliated so many times, during a trip back to his village Balram insults his grandmother and tells the leader and the Chinese premier that in the next eight months he has intention to kill his boss. Balram then decides that the only way that he will be able to escape India's Rooster Coop would be by killing and robbing Ashok. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deals with corrupt mechanism and refill and resell Johnnie Walker black label bottles. He also finds a way out of the coop that no one else inside it can perceive one rainy day he murders Ashok by bludgeoning him with a broken liquor bottle. He then manages to fee to Bangalore with his young nephew. There he bribes the police in order to start up his own driving service. When one of his drivers kills a bike messenger Balram pays off the family and police. Balram explains that his family was almost certainly killed by the stork as retribution for Ashok's murder. At the end of the novel Balram rationalizes his actions by saying that his freedom is worth the lives of Ashok and his family and the monetary success of his new taxi company.

Ashok whether it is the anger of Adiga himself, Adiga answer as follows:

The novel is written in voice – in Balram voice and not in mine. Some of the things that he's confused by or angry about are changes in India that I approve of, for instance, he is uncomfortable with (as many me like him are) the greater freedom that women have in today's India. Some of the other things his unhappy about like corruption – are easier for me to identify with when talking to many men whom I met in India, I found a sense of rage, often suppressed for years and years, that would burst out when they finally met someone they could talk to. But their anger was not the anger of a liberal, middle class man at a corrupt system. It was something more complex – a blend of values both liberal and reactionary – and I wanted to be true to what I'd heard. Balram's anger is not an anger that the reader should participate in entirely – it can seem at times like the rage you might feel if you were in Balram's place – but at other times you should feel troubled by it, certainly (Nick).

The Indian readers responded compassionately to his outspoken, innocent frankness with regard to social problems of our Indian Society. *The White Tiger* Aravind Adiga has been considered an important voice of his generation, exemplified by a break from the past by writing in a distinctly Indian person rather than adopting the techniques of the English modernists. Adiga's provocative novels are known for their unflinchingly honest urban life, and roles of downtrodden people in traditional Indian society, issues of post-colonial identity and the marginalized people. As Adiga quotes in the novel *The White Tiger* is "The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen" (27).

The White Tiger oozes with a sense of what it must be like for a young person growing up in a modern Indian village

with no familial support or economic means to make it in life. Adiga through the voice of protagonist says in his novel *The White Tiger* as; Me and thousands of others in this country like me are half – baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the tom 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, ...all these ideas, half formed and Half Digested and half correct –cooked ideas in your head and I guess these half – formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half – formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with(10-11)

Here he links India's school education with poverty. 'White Tiger', the name given to the young boy white at school, becomes his moniker as he makes his way into the rufarious world of corrupt officials and crime bosses. Because he is literate he has become groomed to be driver and lackery for a rich family in Delhi. Balram becomes quickly acquainted with and is expected to handle, the nastiest situation that involves murder, cheating, bribery and stealing. It is from behind the wheel of Honda civic that this keenly intelligent young man tells the engrossing story as he changes his way from place to place in the big city, doing his master's bidding. His fellow chauffeur meanwhile is simply pawns who are not aware of the role they play in the bigger picture. They are the helpless ones who were exploited by a very unjust and dishonorable society intent on making them its doormat. Balram gradually getting sucked into the routine of committing the odd venial misdeed in order not to be ostracized by his fellow drivers. This is a fine example of how corrupt practices can destroy good intentions in any society.

Though Balram's eyes, anyone can see India as it was never seen it before: the Cockroaches and the call centers, the prostitutes and the worshippers and the water buffalo trapped in so many kinds of cages that escape is impossible, the white tiger and with a charisma as undeniable as if it is unexpected, He teaches a religion that does not create morality and money doesn't solve every problem – but decency can still be found in a corrupt world, and one can get what one want out of life if one eavesdrop on the right conversations. A brutal view of India's class struggle is cunningly presented in Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*. BalramHalwai is from the Darkness, born where India's downtrodden and unlucky are destined to rot.

Adiga's existential and crude prose animals the battle between India's wealthy and poor as Balram suffers degrading treatment at the hands of his employers appropriately. There are so many examples Adiga has given for the humiliation of BalramHalwai. Balram is not only a driver for Mr.Ashok but also a servant carrying bags in the malls, cooking and molishing the legs of the strok, and so on. The mean mentality of the rich shown through the 'lost coin' episode. A one rupee coin of Mongoose, the brother of Mr. Ashok is lost while getting out of the car. He was so mean minded and he asked Balram to search for it. As Adiga writes,

Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car, I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a doe, all in search of that one rupee...Where that rupee coin

went remains a mystery to me to this day Mr. Premier finally. I look a rupee coin out of my shirt pocket, dropped it on the floor of the car, picked it up, and gave it to the Mangoose. (139)

It is really ridiculous that the master is so bothered about one rupee after bribing so many millions of rupees. This is one side of India. Balram was from a small town and his English pronunciation is not perfect. He was asked to say the word 'Pizza' as Balram always says 'Pijja' and they taunted him humiliated him before so many people. He was also dressed like Maharaja for Pinky Madam's enjoyment. These are all so many incidents which gradually influenced him to become a criminal. One such worst incident added a feather on the cap was that Ashok's wife Pinky kills a man in drunken driving. Balram was forced to accept the crime and asked to sign a statement as follows:

To whom so ever it may concern

I, BalramHalwai, son of VikramHalwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement of my own will and intention:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons or person and objects on the night of January 23rd this year....., That I was along in the car and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under o duces and under instruction from no one. (167)

This is the harsh reality. As Adiga mentions in *The White Tiger* that, "the jails in Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle – class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, and soul and arise" (169). Such horrible incidents persuade him to get out of these things and become a free bird for which he has killed his master and decamp with his money. His personal fortunes and luck improve dramatically after he kills his boss and decamps for Bangalore. Balram is a clever and resourceful narrator with a witty and sarcastic edge that endears him to readers, even as he rails about corruption, allows himself to be defiled by his bosses, spews, coarse, invective and eventually profits from moral ambiguity and outright criminality. It's the perfect antidote to lyrical India. Although said to be disappearing in urban India, the caste system still remains in rural India. A person is born into a caste, and the caste one belongs to determines, his or her occupation. Balram gives his own breakdown of the caste system in India, describing that it was ".....clear, well-kept orderly zoo" (63). But no longer – because that caste system broke down, and the powerful with the big bellies took over anything they could – and now there are only two castes in India- the haves and the have not's. Balram was born into the Halwai caste, meaning 'Sweet – maker' and was the son of a rickshaw puller – not a sweet maker, because someone with power stole his destiny of being a sweet – maker from him. He decides to clear his masters to become a bellied man, by resorting to corrupt ways he has learnt through bribery, crime disregarding all civilized ways of life. Throughout the book, there are references to how Balram he grows up with difference. He is referred to as the 'White Tiger' that also a symbol for freedom and individuality. Balram is seen as different from those he grew up with. He is the one who got out of the 'Darkness' and found his way into the 'Light'. As Adiga says "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"(225).Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. Climbing up the social ladder Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and overcomes the social obstacles that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the novel, Adiga took about how Balram was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. The novel is somewhat of a memoir of Balram's journey to find his own freedom in modern day capitalist society. The work shows a modern day, with free market and free business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, but social castes. When Balram was asked which caste he was from, he knew that it could ultimately cause a biased stance in his employer and determine the future of his employment. There is definitely a big difference seen in Balram's lower caste from back home and his current higher caste in their lifestyles, habits and standards of living. This novel reflects how people's economic system creates big division in society. It limits opportunity, social mobility, health and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all.

Balram's quest to becoming an entrepreneur shows the oppression of the lower caste system and the superiority of the upper caste. He tells the story of how India still has a caste system and political and economic corruption is still present. Balram shows the country of India in which a person high on the caste system can bribe people such as police officers with money to cover up murders, sabotage political opponents by rigging votes and money, and have privileges such as shopping in a mall specifically for those of high social and economic importance. According to Adiga poor people are the victim of the economic inequality of society like BalramHalwai in 'The White Tiger'. He wants to take revenge of all the actions of his master. He wants to get rid of the slaveness. He tries to do all these things by visiting prostitutes because he has seen his master Ashok enjoying life with girls in the malls and hotels. As Mr.Ashok always travelled with a girl in golden hair and had sex. Balram also wants to take pleasure with the women in golden hair:

I held it up to the light.

A strand of golden hair

I've got it in my desk to this day (221-222).

Balram's commentary is replete with incongruity, contradiction and anger that runs like a toxin throughout every page. Adrian Turpin says;

Balram's violent bid for freedom is shocking. What, we're left to ask, does it make him – just another thug in India's urban jungle or a revolutionary and idealist? It's a sign of this book's quality, as well as of its moral seriousness that it keeps you guessing to the final page and beyond;" (Turpin)

Mainly the actions of the psychopathic are influenced by the actions of others. They are perverted. They are interested only in their personal needs and desires without concern for the effects of their behaviour on others. So the mission of Balram is completed by killing his master and becoming a big entrepreneur. As Adiga puts in, Balram, the innocent village boy from Laxmangarh goes to New Delhi and works as a driver, humiliated by his masters, learnt corrupt practices and bribing money to buy politicians and policeman to kill and loot at last decides to kill his master and steal the money and became an entrepreneur. His thirst

for freedom made him to do so. So his actions make the audience think about the Indians and much type of aspirants and frustration they represent. (57)

The novel is an intelligent and ruthless portrait of India, which is filled with downtrodden people like Balram who suffers under the suppression of rich. Here the author shows the true picture of Indian society. He also educates the masses about the criminals who are born due to inequality, corruption and injustice in the society. But the Indian people should not overlook the bloody acts, opportunism, entrepreneurial success of people like Balram and emergence of socialists in India; and it is the duty of each and every citizen to try their level best not to indulge in activities like corruption, which would give birth to so many Balram's which is very dangerous to the society.

References

1. Adiga Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi: Harpercollens publishers Print, 2008.
2. Joshi LM. *A typical Fanonian Rebel: the Protagonist of Adiga's the White Tiger*. New Delhi: Harpercollens publishers Print, 2010.
3. Paul Malachi. *Aravind Adiga and the White Tiger*, 2012. Web. 10 Feb 2018 <http://www.Sanhati.com>
4. Adiga, Aravind. *Interview by Stuart Jerrifes*, 2008. Web. 19 Mar. 2018. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/Oct/16/>>