



## From Munna to Ashok Sharma: Refashioning of Balram in *The white tiger*

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### Abstract

Aravind Adiga in his Booker Prize-winning novel, *The White Tiger* delineates the shocking reality of Modern India. The novel deals with various themes but the crux of the novel lies in the enthralling and persuasive refashioning of Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel. From a timid, coward, intelligent boy of the Darkness, he turns into a worker in a tea shop, then into a sincere driver, then into a remorseless murderer and finally into a self-made entrepreneur. From Darkness, he comes to Light. For this transformation, he had to break all barriers of morality and family ties. He had to assume different identities and become flexible in adopting legal and moral codes to take the reins of his social and economic progress into his own hands. The corruption and depravity rampant in society around him provoked him to break free from the rooster coop in which he finds himself. His freedom is very dear to him. He is a young man who is different from the rest of his fellows, he has been called the 'White Tiger' hence he endeavours to become one and prove his uniqueness. He changes himself completely taking lessons from the people and society in which he lives. He triumphs over his desperate struggle to break free from the shackles of the deprived class and emerges as a rich man of Light.

**Keywords:** *White tiger*, trap, rooster coop, darkness, light, Balram

### Introduction

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger* is so exhilarating, captivating and brilliantly written that it won for him the most coveted prize in the field of Literary fiction the Man Booker Prize in the year 2008. The novel has received universal acclaim. Renowned journalists and critics have received it with good critical appreciation. Tanja Beuthien of *Stern* calls it "An incredible trip into the dazzling and pulsating heart of India.... An unlimited reading pleasure." Pankaj Mishra's comment on the back cover of the novel is noteworthy, he writes; "with remorselessly and delightfully mordant wit, *The White Tiger* anatomises the fantastic cravings of the rich; it evokes, too, with startling accuracy and tenderness, the no less desperate struggles of the deprived."

The novel, *The White Tiger* gives the idea of life as a morass, which entangles humanity in various ways. Two sorts of trap are highlighted by Adiga in the novel; one is the maze of richness, where the people who are affluent live in the Light of luxury and power and the other is the mesh of penury where the poor and subaltern live in the Darkness of injustice and dearth. Both the rich and poor are trapped. But the rich like to remain in their trap and the poor want to escape from the trap. The rich are insecure that they might not become less rich or poor. This insecurity makes them adopt all fraudulent means and indulge in corruption. On the other hand, the poor who are trapped in the cage of poverty want to break free like the protagonist of the novel Balram Halwai. He has a strong desire to free himself from this mantrap in which he finds himself since his childhood. He calls it the rooster coop where people of his class are confined to live forever in the same state till they die.

Balram, who is also trapped in this rooster coop struggles to get himself out of this enmeshment. This life is not palatable to him. As a child also he disliked living like a slave; although he could not do much to avoid this situation and

had to follow what his family dictated; especially his grandmother, Kusum who was the head of the family and whose decisions all members of the family had to follow. Balram had always thought of doing something different and big. Gradually his desire changed into a passion and he strived to change his life. He made egregious attempts to escape from the life of servitude and become an entrepreneur, a rich man enjoying the exquisite beauty of the glittering lights of the chandeliers.

The social ascent of Balram was quite rapid. At a very young age, he decided to become a driver. As a boy when he worked at the tea shop in Dhanbad, he did not perform his duty sincerely and with dedication because he did not like doing that low profile job. He utilized all his energy in listening to the conversations of the people who came to the shop. While serving tea and wiping the tables his attention was always focused on over-hearing the conversations. Sometimes he purposely lingered around the tables to pick up information. One such conversation changed his whole life. He heard some miners saying that everyone is buying cars and there is a great need for drivers, and drivers are paid a good salary too. That very moment he decided to learn to drive.

The moment he decided to become a driver, he lost all interest in his work at the tea shop and ran to his brother Kishan who was also working in that tea shop and told him about his desire to learn driving and become a driver. After his father's death, Kishan was looking after him. Balram required a sum of rupees three hundred to learn driving. Fortunately, his grandmother agreed to spend the amount on his training with a condition that he would have to send all the money he earned as a driver to his granny every month. This was his first step on the ladder of his success.

Later when he became the driver of a rich man, he got an opportunity to transcend his social class and move from Darkness to Light. It is believed that drivers are the most

privileged of the working class. This fact is reflected in this novel also through numerous incidents. Balram feels privileged that he has got a chance to drive an air-conditioned, luxury car which otherwise he could not even have got a chance to touch. As a driver, Balram is exposed to so many places and situations. It was because of this education which he received as a driver that he rose to the status of a rich businessman. He saw corruption in all its shades. He experienced insecurity and misery and it was this over-rated misery that gave him the ticket to the modern rat race which is going on in contemporary India. In an article entitled, 'Aravind Adiga: Driving into future' published in the Independent:

Discussing with columnist Boyd Tonkins the social and economic scene in India, how the protagonist Balram Halwai, a chauffeur turned – murderer – turned entrepreneur is a man “who breaks the system”. Citing the driver-hero of 'Man and Superman', Adiga subscribes to George Bernard Shaw's belief that the chauffeur will be “the first member of the working class to move up into the new technocracy and meritocracy” (indianexpress.com)

The story of Balram's odyssey from Munna to Ashok Sharma is not an ordinary tale of 'rags to riches'. Balram the protagonist of the novel was born and bred in Darkness that is in abject poverty. His parents and family called him Munna. His mother died when he was hardly eight years old and his father who was a rickshaw-puller worked hard to make both ends meet. Balram lived in a joint family. His uncles worked as farm-labourers on the land of the landlords of the village. His brother and cousin worked in a tea shop. Balram's parents wanted him to study in a school because they felt he was bright. Balram went to a government school and was considered a good student by his teachers.

The destitute family of Balram had to take a loan to meet out the expenses of the wedding and the dowry of his cousin. To repay the debt the grandmother asked Balram's father to send him also to work in a tea shop. His father, Vikram Halwai wanted that his son should study. He even dared to defy his dominating mother and said; “How many times have I told you: Munna *must* read and write!” (Adiga 28). Balram's mother also knew that Munna would make it through school. But Kusum the grandmother did not listen to anything and passed the diktat that “let the boy go to the tea shop like Kishan that's what I say” (Adiga 289). This is how Balram's dreams to study and to do something big and different were shattered.

Had Munna studied he could have done wonders. His parents knew he was an extraordinary child. His father wanted him to live like a man; “All I want is that one son of mine-at least one – should live like a man” (Adiga 30). On the first day in school when he told his teacher that his name was Munna, the teacher retorted; “Munna? That's not a real name” (Adiga 13) and the teacher named him Balram. When the inspector came to his school the teacher told the inspector to ask Balram to read as he was the smartest of the whole class. When Balram read the sentences, the inspector was impressed and he asked the question; “In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?” (Adiga 35). Balram answered 'the white tiger'. The Inspector complimented him by saying; “That's what you are in this jungle” (Adiga 35).

This is how Balram became the 'White Tiger'.

The praise and title of the 'White Tiger' made Balram conscious of the reality that he was an exceptional boy. But as it usually happens in the Darkness, good news soon converts into bad news, Balram's circumstances also changed and he had to leave school to work in a tea shop. When his classmates see him breaking coal in the tea shop they make fun of him, that the rarest creature the White Tiger has become a coal breaker. Balram was highly dissatisfied and disappointed by his position, he did not want to remain a 'boy' working in a tea shop throughout his life.

He aspires to become a conductor like Vijay. The dress, the whistle and the whole aura of Vijay enchant him. But his family's impoverished condition hampers his aim of doing something distinct. While working in the tea shop in Dhanbad he overhears the conversation of the miners in which they were discussing that drivers earn a good salary. Therefore, he decides to become a driver, but he has to struggle a lot to learn driving. The driver who had underestimated him and said that Halwais can't be drivers later changed his opinion and called him “a surprise package”. After learning to drive he was confronted with the problem of getting a good job. He went from door to door in search of a job at last he goes to a big house where he manages to acquire a job by using all his guile. This was the house of the landlord of his village Laxmangarh. They already had a driver but they needed one more.

By becoming a driver, Balram had fulfilled his desire of doing something different. Although Balram had not been able to get much formal education he filled the gap by educating himself through the experiences of life and by his keen observation. He says; “In terms of formal education, I may be somewhat lacking. I never finished school, to put it bluntly. Who cares! I haven't read many books, but I've read all the ones that count .... I am a self-taught entrepreneur” (Adiga 6). Balram writes to the Chinese Premier, Mr Jiabao; “I gave myself a better education at the tea shop than I could have got at any school” (Adiga 38). He also confesses that he did his job at the tea shop with complete dishonesty and without any dedication and “so the tea shop was a profoundly enriching experience” (Adiga 51). He sincerely occupied himself mentally in overhearing what the customers at the tea shop talked about and in this way, he kept himself well informed.

Keen observation and informal education of Balram taught him much about real life. He endeavoured to move forward and was ready to do anything which could lift him from this swamp of destitution. Soon after attaining the post of driver number two, he determined to get the position of driver number one. Wherefore he worked hard and followed the commands of his master the 'Stork'. He washed and massaged his dirty feet, shampooed the dogs, broomed the courtyard, played with their brats and slept on the ground. He had to do things which he detested but his resolution to rise in life and free himself from the clutches of poverty did not let him waver or bow in the face of adversity. It was because of his acute perception and observation that he was able to detect the reality of Ram Persad, driver number one. Like a typical ambitious man, Balram aims to become driver number one. He spies on driver number one, Ram Pershad and tells the master that he was duping him, he was a Muslim in the garb of a Hindu. Consequently, Ram Pershad leaves his job and Balram becomes driver number one who

would get a chance to drive the Honda City car to Gurgaon with the America-returned son of the Stork, Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam. When Balram leaves Dhanbad he is very glad, he feels he has left the Darkness behind.

His family in the village was still in utter Darkness. Once when he was in Dhanbad he gets a chance to visit his village with Ashok sir in the Honda City car. He is sad to see that things were getting worse there. His brother had become thinner and darker. He seemed to have suddenly become older. Balram had stopped sending them money. His brother is happy to see Balram. He says to Balram, “‘ Life has become hell here’, he said. ‘But we’re so happy you’re out of this, mess – you’ve got a uniform and a good master’” (Adiga 84).

Balram had transcended hell according to his brother but the truth was that the people of Darkness can never get rid of their misery. The degrees may vary. They remain captives of Darkness forever grappling to set themselves free which often goes on to be a futile effort. In Gurgaon also he was like a slave, had to do all domestic chores also. He had to live in the basement with other servants and drivers, where he felt uncomfortable because they teased him. He shifted to a small room that was lying desolate in the basement. This room was dingy and with the menace of mosquitoes. But he felt better in this room. He used a mosquito net and slept there independently without having to listen to the substandard humour and jeers of other drivers.

The driver with vitiligo lips was the only one with whom Balram was friendly. He taught Balram how a driver of a city should live. He taught him how a driver can enjoy when the master is away. But Balram was not interested in these petty pleasures. He was not much satisfied with his life. He was still in the Darkness, at the beck and call of his master, still a slave. Balram had read a poem where the poet says about slaves; “*they remain, slaves, because they can’t see what is beautiful in this world*” (Adiga 40). According to Balram, you cease to be a slave at the very moment when you acquire the wisdom to notice what is attractive in this world.

Even as a child Balram could perceive the beauty of this world. He said, “I was destined not to stay a slave” (Adiga 41). His freedom was very dear to him, he did not want to bound himself to anything which came in the way of his freedom. He even refused to marry when his granny insisted and coaxed him to marry so that he could be tied to the family. He refused vehemently because he had seen the condition of his father and his brother. He thought:

They would do the same thing to him that they did to father – scoop him out from the inside and leave him weak and helpless until he got tuberculosis and died on the floor of a government hospital, waiting for some doctor to see him, spitting blood on this wall and that! (Adiga 86).

The humiliation which Balram had to tolerate because of his position as a servant and as a member of the Darkness is not acceptable to him. He broods over the fact that why people like him have to live like animals in filth and ugliness. Why does he run to press Mr Ashok’s feet? The answer is that since childhood; “The desire to be a servant had been bred into me. Hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga” (Adiga 193). Whenever he did something different like sitting in Buddha pose and chanting

‘Om’, the other drivers made fun of him, he knew that; “The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters or entrepreneurs.... The Coop is guarded from inside” (Adiga 194).

The incident which shook Balram of his temporary complacency and sowed in his mind the idea of breaking this rooster coop was the hit-and-run case of Pinky Madam. On Pinky Madam’s birthday, Ashok wanted Balram to dress like a ‘Maharaja’ and serve them food, which Balram did like an obedient servant. Then after dinner, they went on a drive with him. Pinky madam and Ashok were drunk and Pinky madam insisted to drive the car herself. When she was driving the car quite recklessly, she probably drove over a street child. Both Pinky and Ashok got terrified. Ashok’s shrewd brother Mukesh who had come from Dhanbad and the lawyer asked Balram to take the charge on him. He was asked to sign a document that declared that Balram was driving the car alone when the accident occurred. This was not something new, such things happened to drivers every day. They are framed for murders that their masters commit on the roads; “We have left the villages, but the masters still own our body, mind, soul and arse” (Adiga 169).

The servants in India live in a rooster coop. Balram is also trapped in this coop. they cannot rebel or try to get out of the coop. They are well aware that if they try to break out of this coop, their family will be destroyed and they would be hunted, beaten severely and burned alive. No normal servant can take the risk except a freak. That day Balram lay in his dingy room frightened. He thought his life is over and he will have to spend the rest of his life in jail for the crime which he has not committed. He was terrified but the thought of running away did not cross his mind. His mind was full of the horrors of jail. He was completely cramped in the rooster coop. But as no case was reported he was saved from going to jail.

After this incident, there is a clash between Pinky and Ashok and Pinky leaves for America in the middle of the night. When Ashok comes to know that Balram dropped her at the airport, he is almost on the verge of killing Balram. Had Balram not kicked him to free himself from his grip he would have died. This incident also had a deep impact on Balram’s mind. Gradually his sympathy and reverence for his master diminished. He had seen Ashok visiting Delhi to give huge bribes to the ministers to evade huge taxes and settle the problems arising in his coal business. Balram is a smart and genius man who soaks all the knowledge like a sponge. His ears and mind are always focused on what his master is saying or doing.

Mr Ashok was the ideal of Balram. Balram learnt a lot from Ashok. He learnt how to move forward and rise in life economically. After Pinky Madam’s departure, Ashok was corrupted from innocence to depravity. He had returned from America as an innocent man but life in Delhi had corrupted him. If the master becomes corrupted how can the driver who is so observant remain innocent? The narrative of the sixth chapter of the novel deals:

mainly with the sorrowful tale of how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness. All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr Ashok (Adiga 197).

Thoughts of getting free from the rooster coop in which he

found himself began pestering his mind. He was also haunted by the thoughts of stealing the money which Ashok carries in a bag to grease the palms of the authorities. He is in a state of dilemma. On one hand, he thinks of all the good things which Ashok did for him and on the other hand, he thought that Ashok had almost sent him to jail and on one occasion almost killed him. He is also aware that if he does something wrong the landlords will not spare his family. But the lines of the Urdu poet keep ringing in his mind; “You were looking for the key for years. But the door was always open!”

It was at this time when he was becoming mad with thoughts of blood and theft that Dharam his nephew comes to him with a letter from his granny asking him to take care of Dharam and blackmailed him to send money. At first, Balram is very angry but later he thought; “I had come to the edge of the precipice I had been ready to slay my master – this boy’s arrival had saved me from murder (and a lifetime of prison)” (Adiga 263). That night when he went out to eat with Dharam looking at the dirty water a voice inside him said, “*But your heart has become even blacker than that, Munna*” (Adiga 265). The thoughts of killing his master which Balram was nourishing in his mind were eschewed by him.

Balram who was trying hard to fight the negative thoughts that were pounding his brain was provoked again by Ashok and Ms Uma, who was Ashok’s old girlfriend. Their romance had started blossoming. Two days after Dharam came Balram was taking them down to the Lodhi Gardens. On the way, Ashok shouted at him and commented; “sometimes these people from the Darkness are so stupid.” At this Uma comments, “I told you that already, Ashok” (Adiga 267). From their conversation Balram “caught the words ‘replacement’, ‘driver’ and ‘local’ in English” (Adiga 268). Balram was sharp enough to understand the whole matter; “I thought I was making plans for him? He’d been making plans for me! The rich are always one step ahead of us – aren’t they? Well, not this time. For every step he’d take, I’d take two” (Adiga 268).

The insecurity of losing the job makes Balram more agitated and frustrated. And when he saw the bus conductor Vijay, his childhood hero turned into a politician and Ashok bowing before him, he is shocked to see a landlord’s son being so courteous to “Vijay the pigherd’s son turned bus conductor turned politician from Laxmangarh (Adiga 270). He learns how Vijay is extracting money from Ashok. Vijay talks about his deal with Ashok to the other man in the car; “I said seven, and he said okay. I told him if he didn’t pay, we’d screw him and his father and his brother and the whole coal pilfering and the tax-evading racket they have” (Adiga 271). From the conversation of Vijay with the other man Balram also comes to know about Bangalore having great prospects. Balram confesses; “Many of my best ideas are, in fact, borrowed from my ex-employer or his brother or someone else whom I was driving about. (I confess Mr Premier: I am not an original thinker – but I am an original listener)” (Adiga 47).

The next day Balram took a morning off. He went out of the building with Dharam. He had some doubt in his mind so he waited outside the building. After half an hour he saw his master, Ashok talking to a small dark man of the servant class. It looked as if they had concluded a deal. Balram decided that this time he would strike first. He went to the zoo with Dharam and enjoyed the beauty of the zoo and saw

the white tiger in confinement. He made Dharam write a letter to granny describing the zoo and also asked him to write that uncle Balram is saying that, “I can’t live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny. I’m so sorry” (Adiga 278). Balram used to feel India is full of cages where white tigers are kept, cages where chickens are kept and cages where prostitutes are kept and also cages where servants are kept. The ‘White Tiger’ that is Balram had the insight that he is a distinctive man and deserves greater things. Like the ‘White Tiger’ he wishes to grow faster and heavier; of course, in worth. In a bid to become free from the cage of servitude he musters the courage to kill his master and becomes a ‘free man’. He runs away with his seven hundred thousand rupees to Bangalore along with Dharam. In Bangalore, he starts his company, “White Tiger Drivers”. He says that; “a few hundred thousand rupees of someone else’s money and a lot of hard work can make magic happen in this country” (Adiga 301).

This ‘half-baked fellow’, Balram becomes a triumphant businessman and proudly says that “Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay” (Adiga 11). In Bangalore, he assumes a new name ‘Ashok Sharma’. “According to Balram, one primary characteristic of the self-made man is his ability to repeatedly transform himself – to not only change his profession, uniform and outward presentation but also his very identity” (litcharts.com). He attributes his success to the knowledge which he gained from his life, the road, the pavement, the tea shops and from observing Mr Ashok minutely. Balram, the ‘hunted criminal’ becomes the ‘solid pillar of Bangalorean society’. Thus, “Munna, whose destiny was to be a sweet maker” refashions himself as Ashok Sharma, the rich entrepreneur of Bangalore who sits in the bright lights of the chandelier and says: “I’ve made it! I’ve broken out of the coop!” (Adiga 320).

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