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AN ANALYSIS OF ADIGA’S “THE WHITE TIGER”: A POST MODERN PERSPECTIVE

Abstract

This paper focuses on the postmodern aspects of Aravind Adiga’s book “The White Tiger”. There is a vast representation of capitalist mindset, Marxist approach, fragmentation, paranoia, irony and intertextuality in this novel. The image of modern India had acquired such media hype and its success stories started receiving so much massive attention that the sufferings of the vast majority of the deprived both in the urban and rural India remained unheard in the noise. The economic, scientific and technological boom in India had attained the new value of the grand narratives of the country. This image of a successful India whitewashes the sufferings of the poor and the socio-economic problems that challenge the growth and development of the nation. This paper tries to re-inscribe the imagination of the present generation about the sordid deprivation of majority of the people so that the research scholars, political leaders and policy makers get new directions to address. This paper has expounded how the landlordism, poverty, ill-equipped education system, poor health facilities, corruption in government agencies and moral decline have been aggravating the sufferings of the poor and decelerating the development of the nation.

Keywords: The White Tiger, Human and Societal Values, India, Corruption, Rooster Coop, Human identity.

Introduction

The White Tiger starts with the task to reveal the growth story of India. Adiga inverts the social pyramid of India and

reveals its base composed of the highly volatile half-baked men and their quest of leading a dignified life amongst poverty and apathy of the ruling class. Balram, the protagonist of the novel believes that by murdering his master Mr. Ashok and “borrowing” money from him he has broken the Great Indian Rooster Coop, but he fails to realize that on breaking one coop and he enters the other coop which is more strong and illusive than the earlier one. Balram enters a vicious circle escape from which is completely impossible by the path he has chosen for himself. Lyotard famously defined postmodernism as incredulity towards met a narratives or grand narratives. Lyotard and the other postmodern thinkers question the validity of universal truth. Christopher Butler in his book *Postmodernism* states:

“The postmodernist novel doesn’t try to create a sustained realist illusion: it displays itself as open to all those illusory tricks of stereotype and narrative manipulation, and of multiple interpretation in all its contradiction and inconsistency, which are central to postmodernist thought.” (Butler, 2002)

The protagonist who calls himself “The White Tiger”, “An Entrepreneur” and “A Thinking Man” begins to write letters to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao with a view to acquaint him with “The Truth About Bangalore”. Adiga through the narrative of Balram projects before the readers two Indias- the India of Light and the India of Darkness. These two Indias are placed on top of one another in a hierarchical order but when this hierarchy is scanned under the prism of values the two worlds are found so entangled with each other that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. Therefore the belief of the protagonist that the journey of his life is a journey from darkness to light is the greatest paradox of the novel. Linda Hutcheon points out that the predominant characteristic of postmodern writing is “an inherently paradoxical structure”. Balram describes himself as: “A man in hiding, and yet he is surrounded by chandeliers” (TWT, 118). The whole life of the protagonist is built on paradoxes. He considers his life to be a journey from darkness to light without realizing that the light is darker than the darkness. He associates his freedom with chandeliers, beautifully emanating light, but the light they emanate is as artificial as the freedom Balram attains by acquiring wealth. It is similar to the liberation which his mother

attained in the holy Ganga. Paradoxes lead him to vicious circles and in the end we find Balram caught into a vicious circle from which there is no escape. While witnessing the cremation of his mother in Benaras at the banks of Ganga he realizes that the black mud of Ganga was not liberating but some thing that was “holding her back” from liberation:

“She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes were flexed and resisting ; but the mud was sucking her in.... And then I understood: this was the real God of Benaras- this black mud of the Ganga into which everything died, and decomposed, and was reborn from, and died into again. The same would happen to me when I died and they brought me here. Nothing would get liberated here.” (TWT, 18)

He was concerned about his mind escapes the fact that the vicious circles of life are more difficult to break than that of death. The postmodernist world is ruled by materialism and capitalism and like the black mud of Benaras, the God of this world is not redeeming but is an alluring trap. Barry Lewis in his essay Postmodernism and Literature tries to summarize certain defining characteristics of postmodern fiction as:

“Temporal disorder; the erosion of the sense of time; a pervasive and pointless use of pastiche; a foregrounding of words as fragmenting material signs; the loose association of ideas; paranoia; and vicious circles, or a loss of distinction between logically separate levels of discourse.” (Lewis, 2001)

Adiga presents the detailed description of poor Halwai with high ambitions, slowly changes his qualities from innocence to crime and corruption. The differences shown in the society poor and rich are clearly picturized in his novel ‘*The White Tiger*’. Adiga has the ability to portrait different social issues with its true nature and reality which makes the presentation of this novel more authentic. Suneetha says about him:

“Due to his journalistic background, Adiga enriches the readers with probing perspectives to examine life in the fast changing Indian societies evoking our conscience to the abject poverty.” (Suneetha, 2012).

The protagonist Balram in order to become an entrepreneur changes his soft nature on seeing the activities of his master. The

innocence he has learnt as a village boy completely erases when he goes to Delhi with his master. His innocence is wiped off and he becomes a criminal by murdering his master and stealing a good deal of money from him. Above all this, he escapes from Delhi and hides himself from the penal actions by bribing police officials. To fulfill his ambitions he settles down in Bangalore as an entrepreneur with the help of the stolen money. The human values, which he had in the beginning of the story was only good. He followed truth and he won the hearts of his master Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam. He slowly loses his integrity and cheats his master. The environment and circumstances change his life.

Discussion and Analysis

The India projected through the eyes of Balram in the Adiga's novel is very similar to world view of the postmodernism. Born and bred in the darkness, he moves to the city and finds himself struggling to understand the lifestyle of his master Ashok, the rhythm of the capital city Delhi, the smugness of the fellow drivers, the machinations of his own family and last but not the least the desires and aspirations of his own heart. Using symbolism Adiga creates a complex mesh of opposing value systems such as Spiritualism, Materialism and Authoritarianism and Freedom. Books and Beauty in the novel represent spiritualism, wisdom and knowledge. As a child he would spend hours simply staring at the black fort and the pond admiring the beauty and mystique of the old dilapidated landscape. Balram loved reading and the lines which inspired him most in his life were the lines of Iqbal: "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in the world". He knew he was intended to be a free man because he could appreciate the beauty in this otherwise sordid and dreary world. In his earlier life in the village, Balram could never muster the courage to walk up to the fort, but as the rage and loathing for his condition inside him grows he finally sheds his fears and embraces the source of beauty in his life. He leaned from the edge of the fort and looked at his village. It was a beautiful sight but his disgust for the place that gave him a life of servility overwhelms him and he spits. This was the first step towards his freedom, freedom from the fear to aspire for good things in life and the freedom from the fear to expect to be treated humanely. He says:

"I spat. Again and again. And then, whistling and

humming, went back down the hill. Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat." (TWT, 42).

It was the beauty and spiritualism that inspires Balram to seek freedom, to break away from the rooster coop, but by breaking away from one coop he unconsciously enters into another coop which is stronger and more illusive than the earlier one, the life of his master Mr. Ashok full of self-loathing and desperation is an illustration of the power of this coop. Cars, Malls, Whisky, Women represent the lure of materialism and when Balram murders Mr. Ashok and assumes his identity he also absorbs the spirit of his master, the spirit of insatiable greed. The greatest symbol of authoritarianism and conforming force in the novel is the Great Indian Rooster Coop. Adiga in the novel compares the Indian social system with the rooster coop stuffed with birds of numerous kinds who see their colleagues slaughtered before their own eyes but do not have the courage or understanding to rebel against such brutality. Balram to his own horror finds that this human coop works from inside. Though he loathes to be a servant but whenever he sees his masters every instinct inside him propels him to bow before them and kiss their feet. When all his attempts to take control of his own life shattered and his marriage fails he starts slipping into a life of corruption and depravity. This corruption of his personality strengthens the desire in Balram to break free of him. The first way he could think of expressing his freedom is to cheat on his master.

The other moment of Balram's life was when he comes face to face with the white tiger. This is the creature which gets born in the jungle once in every generation, for the first time in the zoo. Almost instinctively he could feel the pain of the tiger's life of captivity and its frustration manifested in the restless, repetitive and compulsive walking behind the bamboo bars. When the eyes of the two suddenly meet, Balram feels the two bodies, minds and spirits merging into each other. It was time to break another bond that kept him straggling to his coop. Balram's father had only asset in the shape of his son. While emphasizing the importance of education he screams before his son, the meager aspiration of his life was to make at least one of his sons lead a life like a man or to be precise human being, but this thought confuses Balram. Since then his life becomes a mission to understand what it takes to become a man. The most inspiring role model he finds around him

in his village Laxmangarh was Vijay, the bus conductor. As a child he observes:

“I wanted to be like Vijay—with a uniform, a pay cheque, a shiny whistle with a piercing sound, and people looking at me with eyes that said, how important he looks.” (TWT, 31)

From the beginning he associates success and happiness with the material things. The models of success that he finds around him as a child are ruthless landlords, corrupt politicians and opportunistic henchmen. Therefore his preferred path to success is not the much praised path of hard work and loyalty. He makes his way up from the darkness through a trail of blood and bribe, the way shown by his masters.

John Barth, an American postmodern novelist, in his essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*, expressed the dilemma that how it is possible to continue to write in the face of the knowledge that all the forms of fiction had been used up by the moderns. In the experimentation and innovation of the modernist age the literature had somehow become too subjective and elitist. Postmodern writers attempt to democratize literature without thinning its literariness. As an answer to this dilemma the postmodern writers evolved a strategy which Charles Jencks, a postmodernist architect, calls as “double coding” which refers to the blend of traditional techniques with modern techniques, just to connect with the community and other writers. They strive to strike a balance between the elite and the popular and between the old and the new. An aspect of this ironic technique is the use of parody and pastiche in the writing.

The narrative structure of the novel evokes many other writers and books to produce an ironic effect. For instance the story of Balram in the beginning of the novel in his village Laxmangarh as a child with hidden potential struggling because of his disadvantaged background and apathy of his family evokes the Dickensian expectations of poetic justice and then subverts these expectations to underline the ruthlessness of the present condition. The other famous literary work that the novel evokes in the informed reader's mind is Pamela or Virtue Rewarded, the diary of a servant girl to her family expressing her great ethical trials and tribulations at the hands of her master, again to ruthlessly subvert the high moralistic expectations from the novel. The book is also

cloaked in all the trappings of pretentious optimism of self-help guides which assert that we hold our destiny in our hands. The very texture of the novel stands in conflagration to the adherence to any kind of genre or literary form and the sensibilities associated with them.

Balam appears psychopathic in his utter remorselessness for killing his master Mr. Ashok as well as becoming the cause of the probable murder of his whole family. Foucault in his analysis of insanity and marginality in society had emphasized that society often fails to see that the insane are also deeply unhappy individuals. When he murders Mr. Ashok in the eyes of Balam he was not Mr. Ashok he was “the stork’s son”, a symbol of oppressive exploitative system. He realizes that he had committed a heinous crime but the outcome of this crime for him outweighs the guilt associated with it. He justifies himself in the end:

“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.” (TWT, 321)

His sense of delight is a false one because he fails to see that in his chosen path an escape from the rooster coop is impossible. He is no more a servant to the stork or the vulture or the buffalo he has now turned into a slave to his own unlimited desires and temptations.

“The buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, And each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him.”

“The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village.”

“His brother was called the Wild Boar....”

“The Raven owned the worst land which was the dry....”

“The Buffalo was the greediest of the lot....” (TWT, 24).

In modern era, Marxism is generally recognized as an ideology of fear, oppression, and dictatorship. The experience of the Soviet Union has rendered the populace unaware of the wider goals of communism, elucidated fully in Marx’s and Engels’

groundbreaking work, *The Communist Manifesto*. Through Balram Halwai's goal to realize his essential human dignity and fulfill his father's wish that he become a real man, the novel, *The White Tiger*, is therefore a manifestation of Marxist beliefs. The novel widely criticizes traditional institutions in India, offers a cynical view of religion, and calls for public revolution in line with Marxist values. Being the ideal rural Indian poor man, Balram allows the audience to identify with his struggles and to overlook his many inaccuracies stemming from his lack of formal education. Adiga effectively criticizes the traditional caste, institutional, and religious systems that define modern industrializing India.

Through the use of Balram's scrutiny of Indian institutions, the author enforces the Marxist belief that ruling superstructures must be closely challenged and questioned. For Marxists, overturning traditional institutions is the first step in a revolution. Balram commences his critique of India's institutions by criticizing the country's poor infrastructure, resulting from government inefficiencies. At the outset of the novel, Balram is clearly cynical of India's infrastructure and government:

"Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs." (TWT, 2)

He is taking direct aim at democracy for many of India's faults. His admiration of Fidel Castro, the communist Cuban revolutionary of the 1950s, demonstrates Balram's mindset and by extension, the novel's Marxist tendencies. The novel also attacks the corruption of India's institutions and furthers the criticism of superstructures that Marxism endorses. This novel reflects the turmoil, both economically and politically, that is taking place in India. India is currently grappling with the stresses of capitalism; this book captures the struggles of a populace to embrace modernity, and by doing so, demonstrates the muted history of class-conflict in India.

Through the use of extensive attacks on religion and traditional family structures, Balram promotes Marxist beliefs and Marxist division of families in the name revolution. This novel is a Marxist critique of the caste, institutional, and religious systems

that are present in modern industrializing India. Balram Halwai, the unreliable yet genuine protagonist, insists on the right for basic human dignity for all Indians. The novel is an effective attack on the dominant ruling classes of India who currently keep the poor as their servants. In line with Marxism's main goal of spurring on a communistic revolution that favors the working class, Balram demonstrates the satisfaction of the rich and the wretched state of the Indian poor, and urges the public to rise up against their oppressors. Through the emotional use of comparison, the author frames the rich as morally corrupt, religion as a tool of subjugation, and Indian institutions as dysfunctional. The author's reflections generate controversy because they directly attack the strong family values that traditional Indian families still uphold.

"This criticism of India's institutions is echoed by Adiga's and Adams' experiences in the slums of Mumbai, where three million people sleep on the street every night." (Adams, 2009).

Many allusions and references can be traced in the novel *The White Tiger* which makes the novel multi-layered and endows it with different levels of meaning. The title that Balram gives to the story of his life "The autobiography of a Half Baked Indian" brings with it the allusion of another autobiography written by the famous writer Nirad Chaudhari which he published in 1951. Chaudhari's book relates the life-story of the author, the mental intellectual development of the self-confessed anglophile writer. While the "autobiography of an Unknown Indian" observes the changing historical situation, at the time when the British were leaving India, the 'autobiography of a Half Baked Indian' narrates the moral decline squalor that set in the country after independence. One can distinguish that the mining scams that were exposed during the period of the writing of the novel provide the inspiration and the resource material for the novel. The infamous 'coalgate' scam can be directly read into the novel and forms the timbre of the novel. The dealings of Ashok, the miner from Dhanbad with the different politicians and the insatiable appetite for money and power by both the sides is a reflection of the rampant corruption that the newspapers carried especially when the novel was being written.

The hero, Balram, is a murderer and reminds one of the novels of Dostovesky. He is a sort of Raskolnikov from the novel *Crime and Punishment*, a poor student Rodin Raskolnikov, who

plans and murders an unscrupulous pawnbroker for cash. Balram too murders his immoral and unethical master to lead a decent life. Raskolnikov tries to justify the deed in various ways the good deeds he can perform. He relates himself with Napoleon Bonaparte and believes that murder is allowed for higher purpose. Balram too compares himself to Alexander, Abraham Lincoln Mao & Hitler. Although Balram is responsible for not only the murder of his master but also Balram's entire family, his heart doesn't bleed nor does his soul cry out. He is cynical, immoral and unrepentant. Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality highlights the importance of and the formative influences that other texts have in shaping a particular work. It is not other works of literature but other texts such as films, advertisements, and media whose presence can be noticed in the novel. In the novel, intertextual elements can be distinguished in many of its situations and episodes.

The characters are given names of animals as per their attributes and their area of domination. The four landlords in Laksmangarh are described as - The Stork who controls all water ways, water bodies ; The Buffalo who controls the road and took a cut from every rickshaw puller and every road user; The Raven who controls the unproductive land and took a cut from all grazers and goatherds; The wild boar who owns all the agricultural land. This not only brings out the animal nature of the characters but also adds a fable like effect to the novel. The novel becomes a parody for the fables. One recalls the Aesop fable "Country Mouse and City Mouse" when Balram is nicknamed 'country mouse' by the city drivers. In an ironic inversion of the fable the country mouse learns the lessons of the city and even beats the city mouse to come out of the rooster coop and gain independence. While the fables lead one to moral lessons and growth, Adiga's novel traces the reverse order.

"The novel makes the readers see from a journalistic perspective. How the recent economic and technological change has not made any difference in the quality of life among the poor, rather the gap between the rich and the poor is growing every day." (Shagufta & Qasmi, 2013)

Jungle, Light and Darkness and the population of the novel is presented as trapped in a jungle. Time and again the novelist refers to India as a "jungle" where Balram Halwai the protagonist has to

carve a life for himself. These images make up the fabric of his tale and present the difficulty of the poorer characters fighting the might of the rich ones. When Balram learns to drive the car from an older driver he says, “The road is a jungle, get it?” The reference is not only to the literal road but the road upon which the young Balram is going to tread the journey of life. His story is that of a poor boy from a small village of Laxmangarh in north India. His family sends him to Dhanbad to fend for himself at a tea shop. However, his landlord and mentor take him to Delhi where he learns to drive and serve his master. Balram’s life is a life of slavery. He has to serve his master with abject humility both as a driver and a cook. He realizes that to overcome this deep divide he would have to take some drastic action. Meanwhile when he works as a driver for his landlord’s son he is forced to take on the blame in an accident. The accident was due to the drunken negligence of his master’s westernized wife. His master forces him to accept the blame. However Balram has his revenge when he murders his master to be free for the rest of his life. He leaves Delhi for Bangalore and works as a taxi operator providing cars for those who work at call centers. Soon he has a fleet of twenty seven cars and proves himself as an entrepreneur. The metaphor of the “jungle” is juxtaposed with reference to areas of “Light” and “Darkness”. The jungle has been described as having a dual personality: and “an area of Darkness” and an area of Light. These are places within India where Balram travels.

“At fault for this lack of infrastructure is democracy, according to Balram. He says, “If I were making a country, I’d get the sewage pipes first, then the democracy” (TWT, 80).

Adiga has used ‘darkness’ as a metaphor for corruption in India. The cars, the roads, the times, the people and the places that are involved in corruption had always been described as dark.

This repetitive use of darkness for corruption reminds the readers of Charles Dickens’ novel *Bleak House*, where Dickens uses the metaphor of “fog” for corruption:

“Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aids and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city...at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his

High Court of Chancery....” (Dickens, 1853).

Compare this passage of Charles Dickens with Adiga’s connotative use of smog and pollution as a metaphor for corruption in Indian government:

“The President’s House was covered in smog and blotted out from the road; it seemed as though there were no government in Delhi that day. And the dense pollution that was hiding the prime minister and all his ministers and bureaucrats...” (TWT, 146-147).

Balaram makes the reader see that he is the product of the system that is discriminatory, biased, inequitable and therefore faulty. Born in low caste & poverty, his life is a tale of sufferings – physical and mental. Deprived of even the bare necessities of life, Balram feels cut off from the mainstream of Indian society where snobbery, glamour and disparity abound. Hence *The White Tiger* deals with the social exclusion of the persona who carries with himself incorrigible wounds of social stigma and destitution. The actions and reactions of Balram Halwai result from his plight. He suffers from endless existential crisis from which there is no escape. The present paper is an attempt to illustrate the deep sense of social exclusion of the hero of the novel and his nameless existence which necessities him to search for his identity thereof. It seems that all the post-colonial writers of the East and the West emphasize re-interpretation of reality to human being and human life in the light of emerging challenges and situations.

Conclusion

In the present novel the writer has sought to focus on the social exclusion and the marginality from the view point of the underprivileged (Balram), rather than from the vantage point of the privileged persona. The entire novel is a ruthless delineation of the pathetic experiences of a servant (Balram) under the exploitative domination of the owner, Mr. Ashok Sharma. Hence out of the master-servant, employer-employee, bourgeois-proletarian, have-have-nots nexus is borne in the dialectic of the novel. Balram Halwai deploring the grinding poverty and deprivation of his rickshaw-puller father bursts out to India’s present class-conflicts. All the aspects portray the brute and base qualities of the animals personified by the men in the novel. Further, here the landlords and wealthy businessmen have been depicted as greedy and

exploitative. They are ready to acquire the land of the poor peasant's, take away their prized possessions and always underpay them. Even their women were not spared, they were sexually exploited. Adiga's presented picture is dark and brings out the exploitative nature of the landlords intensely. Even if do not enter into this controversy, we realize that the book is hard hitting and presents the negative side of the country. Adiga does this both thematically as well as through a generous use of imagery and metaphors. Thematically Adiga draws upon the important rich-poor divide amongst the teeming millions of the fascinating South Asian sub-continent, India. He points out that the rich live in their fabulous homes while the poor are subject to toil and slavery. From the analysis made on human and societal values found in the novel, it leads to a conclusion that the novelist has a soft corner for the poor in the society. Arvind Adiga has communist ideas and he stresses on socialism. Balram, the hero of "*The White Tiger*" born in a poor family claims equal rights as his master Ashok possess. He presents the imbalanced picture of the Indian culture and society, the greedy nature of both rich and the poor to get more and more materialist power by fair or unfair means.

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