

Social and Political Servitude: An Analysis of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Arvind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, provides a compelling portrayal of social and economic serfdom in contemporary India. Through the lens of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, the novel explores the oppressive systems that perpetuate social inequality and economic exploitation. This paper aims to analyze the various manifestations of serfdom depicted in the novel by exploring the characters' struggles and the underlying societal structures.

Keywords: Oppressive system, Servitude, Economic exploitation, Cultural imperialism

Introduction

Aristotle is called “man as a social animal, but man can be mentioned itself as a social and cultural animal in the twentieth century and the 21st century.” Society is commonly understood as a collective of individuals residing within a certain geographic region, characterised by organised patterns of cooperation and the shared adoption of a distinct cultural framework. In essence, a society can be defined as a collective of individuals who interact and form social bonds, whereas culture refers to the shared system of beliefs, customs, and practises that are inherited and upheld by a community. It might be argued that society and culture are inherently interconnected, such that the absence of one would render the other non-existent. Literature serves as a reflective medium that illuminates the intricacies of society and culture, offering a portrayal of the prevailing societal and cultural dynamics within a certain temporal and spatial context.

Indian English fiction has been a witness to the profound impact of social, cultural, economic, and political transformations on the trajectory of the nation since its inception.

English literature in India serves as an outlet to acknowledge and rectify societal inadequacies. The authors of India strive to show a profound preoccupation with these issues during the latter part of the twentieth century. Numerous gifted writers have written extensively on socio-cultural maladies, political transformations such as poverty, exploitation, inequality, caste discrimination, the practise of “purdah pratha,” child marriage, cultural clashes, historical events, and romantic narratives. These themes are prevalent in the fiction produced during this era. Numerous authors employ these particular themes, and Arvind Adiga is one among them.

Arvind Adiga, an Indo-Australian author, was born on October 23, 1974, in Madras, India. Many authors write about or represent a variety of cultural issues and garnet the protagonist and character like those people, who live in the society and face many cultural and social problems; however, Adiga offers the most significant contribution to representing the Indian society and culture by his fiction in the field of English literature. Poverty, casteism, discrimination, and political unrest are some of the major issues that Adiga addresses in his fiction. He analyses the Indian economy, its political system, its social and cultural traditions, and its cultural significance. India has just come into the international spotlight, but underneath its gleaming surface lives a billion people who lack access to even the most basic human necessities. Adiga has criticised the person's faults for the social and cultural standing bases on cast, religion, prosperity and filthy political system which are functioning together for the human pathogens and the complete society. He is interested in observing the world as it is, including its social and cultural ills, corruption, and widening wealth gap. Adiga elaborates on the causes of domestic discontent and terrorist attacks in a recent interview.

“These problems have been brewing for a long time. The causes are complex, but one common theme I find is the heightened tension within the country that’s caused by the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The flare-ups can often take the form of ethnic or regional protests, but the underlying grievances are often economic: those people who live over there are doing much better than we are. Fixing the economic disparities has to be part of any attempt to address India’s growing unrest. The country’s intelligence and police agencies need to be reformed and modernised; right now they seem

way behind the terrorists. In particular, the police have to make an effort to reach out to Indians of all religions; right now, religious minorities are intensely suspicious of the police, and with good cause.”

Domestic help has been a staple of India's affluent, traditional households for generations. The demand for this workforce segment has increased rapidly in the twenty-first century, driven by the expansion of the economy and the breakdown of traditional joint family arrangements. In urban areas, members of the working class, such as maids, drivers, chefs, and security guards, are forced to observe the lavish lives led by their wealthy employers. Adiga stated, during an interview with Arthur J. Pais:

“The shameless way wealth is flaunted is extraordinary. Poor people [see] the money the very rich have. The migration of labour is increasing in a big way, especially in north India. Old traditional ties and social structure in the villages and small towns are disappearing, and social unrest and resistance are growing. The naxalite [Maoist] movement is reviving in many parts of the country and is gaining strength.”

The White Tiger, Arvind Adiga's debut novel and the recipient of the Booker Prize, was published in 2008 and examines socioeconomic distinctions, Western cultural imperialism, and other social issues. Adiga depicted Balram's transformation from a scrawny country child into a svelte city businessman who, in the novel's concluding setting, murders his employer. Arvind Adiga isn't just curious as to why his protagonist acts the way he does; he also wants to know why the protagonist climbed the social ladder in the first instance. Balram is of a lower social caste and social class. He was born into the clan of Halwai, whose members make a living by cooking and selling food in the local village market. In India, nobody would look up to someone in his line of work. Balram was hurt by the actions of his fellow villagers and he now sees it as a personal challenge to exact vengeance on those responsible for the humiliation he endured as a child. In the village, people tend to look down on Balram because of his open eye. The aesthetic of his mantle is a reflection of modern societal conditions, and his last act of murder may be traced back to the inequity and fury he felt growing up in that environment. As Preetha sees it

“Balram's journey from Laxamangarh to Dhanbad, then Delhi, and finally to Bangalore certifies that the socio-psychological condition of the underclass remains unchanged. Balram, as the representative of the underclass, exemplifies their anger, frustration, protest, and revenge. He decides to defy the moral code of conduct to succeed in life. His murder of Ashok is the reaction to the deep-rooted frustration of the underclass experiencing the polarities between the upper class and lower class.”

Adiga's novel effectively depicts the subaltern problem and conveys the idea that the role of the lower class is significant in the narrative of India's development. The novel offers a powerful examination of India's class division. Balram pits the poor and powerless of our society against the wealthy and powerful. Adiga's portrayal of Balram reveals his predilection for an upside-down, rather than a bottom-up, perception of power. India is the world's greatest democracy, but still the poor are in the same predicament. They are not free to act as they like. Adiga's story focuses on the fact that many Indians still live in poverty despite the country's progress as a developed nation. As he puts in *The White Tiger* “These are the three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera, and election fever. The last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in.”

Adiga makes an effort to delve into the many societal power structures and the ways in which they affect individuals. He analyses the interconnected forms of power—political, economic, physical, religious, and ideological—that perpetuate injustice and inequality. Both the dominant class's control over the subordinate classes and the resistance of the latter are brilliantly described and explored in *The White Tiger*. His protagonists are driven by an unquenchable need to push back, and they dare to say things like “I'm tomorrow” (6). People's intense hunger for control makes it imperative that we better understand power dynamics in the modern world.

“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 know by heart the works of the four greatest poets of all time—Rumi, Iqbal, Mirza Ghalib, and a fourth fellow whose name I forget. I am a self-taught entrepreneur.”

The White Tiger challenges our privileged understanding of the intricacies of national and international power structures. The colonial era saw domination without hegemony power equation, while modern India's power dynamics are based on distinct assumptions.

“It is axiomatic that modern democracies like India cannot support inherently violent changes. But at the same time, it cannot completely eradicate the social structures of servitude, dependency, and inexorable hegemony that impede class mobility. These dependencies exclude and alienate subaltern people like Balram and push them to crime for their redemption.”

The novel suggests that our political system is the source of “rottenness and corruption” in our society, which in turn stymies any efforts to promote social progress or economic security. It holds back half of the country from reaching its full potential. Politicians in general are “half-baked, as they say. In a nutshell, that sums up the tragedy of this nation.” This novel is a brutal, realistic exposition of the evil of feudal lords, poverty, corruption, moral degradation, social and economic injustice, and the reality of the capitalist system. According to Krishna:

“The story of Balram’s emergence is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. Politics is the last refuge for scoundrels. Government doctors, entrepreneurs, tax payers, and industrialists all have to befriend a minister and his sidekick to fulfil their vested interests. Mukesh and Ashok also bribe the minister to settle income tax accounts. Elections, though we feel proud of our glorious democracy, are manipulated; power transfers from one hand to another, but the common man’s fate remains unchanged.”

The white tiger holds significant cultural symbolism in East Asian societies, representing notions of strength, independence, and individualism. Balram has always stood out from those around him. He was the one who emerged from the shadows and into the sunshine. As Balram says, “The journey from darkness to light is not smooth. Only a white tiger can do this.”(250) He also says, “A white tiger keeps no friends.” (302) The white tiger

does not engage in group hunting due to its unwillingness to distribute prey among its fellow animals.

The word “Rooster Coop” used in the novel, serves as an accurate portrayal of Indian society. Furthermore, the author draws a parallel between this concept and the chicken market situated near Jama Masjid market in New Delhi. In this market, numerous roosters are ruthlessly slaughtered on a daily basis, while those who remain alive witness their impending fate without exhibiting any form of resistance. Similarly, humans are subjected to the same treatment. Impoverished peasants are subjected to the hardships imposed by feudal lords. The narrator used sarcasm to depict the socio-economic disparity between the affluent and impoverished individuals, as evidenced by the following statement: “Within our nation, we can discern two distinct categories of individuals: those who partake in Indian liquor and those who indulge in English liquor. Traditional alcoholic beverages commonly consumed in rural areas of India include toddy, arrack, and country hooch, which are often associated with those from local backgrounds, such as me. The consumption of 'English' spirits is typically associated with individuals of higher socioeconomic status. The English have left behind a variety of alcoholic beverages, including rum, whisky, beer, and gin.” (73)

In a similar vein, Balram articulates the unwavering loyalty of servants and their constrained perspective in order to elucidate the concept of the 'Rooster Coop'. He asserts that, in the bustling streets of Delhi, it is not uncommon to witness a chauffeur manoeuvring an unoccupied vehicle, with a black suitcase resting on the rear seat. Contained within the suitcase are one million and two million rupees, a sum of money that surpasses the lifetime earnings of the chauffeur. If he were to appropriate the funds, he would have the means to relocate to other destinations such as America, Australia, or any other location of his choosing, so commencing a fresh chapter in his life. However, he carries the aforementioned luggage to the desired location as instructed by his superior.

Furthermore, Balram emphasises the shared behaviour of all the rich or upper class people who exploit the poor and act inappropriately with them; he, furthermore, has a sharp urge to break out the traditional boundaries to fill the gap between the rich and the poor, and so that the dream of a shining India can be realised in reality, where people of all backgrounds and identities can share in the bounty of a peaceful existence based on the principle of live and let live. Moreover, he believes that one has to take risks in his life to

achieve and fulfil the dream and to break this coop: “Only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed—hunted, beaten, and burned alive by masters—can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature.” (175)

According to Balram, the whole country is like a zoo where we, as animals, have our own limitations and boundaries, and due to these boundaries, we behave like social animals, sometimes also called civilized. Furthermore, Balram says that before independence we were united, socially and psychologically, but as we became independent or as we started thinking about becoming an independent economic state, our social behaviour once again converted into animal behaviour, and the zoo became a jungle. Balram also says “15 August 1947 was not an independence day; perhaps it was a day when the British Indian Government opened the cages, let the animals attack, and ripped each other, and thus jungle law was replaced by zoo law.” (63)

Balram says that the distinction between “dark India” and “shining India” is illusory, because the rich people take poor people as an instrument for this he share the experience he had with Pinki who killed a child during drunk and drive case and Balram was trapped and compelled to own the crime. At the police station, Balram was forced to sign a statement admitting fault for the accident, which read as follows: “TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN, I, Balram Hawaii, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya do make the following statement of my own free 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... I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.” (168) So, with these lines, readers can comprehend the oppression of the upper class as well as the plight of the lower. By reclaiming the postcolonial places, identities, and voices that colonial surrogates had silenced, Balram gives power back to the oppressed. His actions challenge the status quo of ideological and cultural domination, while also serving as a warning to the marginalised to brace themselves for the humiliation, resentment, and sadness that will inevitably accompany their fight for equality.

Conclusion

The author tried to convey the idea that sustainable development can't be achieved by ignoring the development of a particular group or class in society, and these isolated groups

may be from downtrodden groups or from poor families, as in India, poor and downtrodden are used as synonyms. Moreover, it is also believed that these downtrodden people are the obstacle to the country's overall development, which is a big myth. The novel is an outstanding social commentary on the poor-rich divide in India. Balram, an imaginary character in the novel, depicts the downtrodden, oppressed sections of our society against the rich. He, furthermore, opened the reality of dark and shining India, and according to Balram, class struggle is inevitable in nature and lies in each and every society and every place, due to which there is a big ditch created between rich and poor, which is increasing by leaps and bounds. Thus, for the advancement and growth of the country in true sagacity, this ever increasing socioeconomic inequality has to be bridged because the educated population of youth belonging to the marginalized sections is increasing at an alarming rate and their helplessness and vulnerability is obvious either from their reticent suppression or intrepid rebellion.

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