

Depiction of Darker Side of India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a true presentation of the socio-cultural and political India. The novel presents India's hidden darkness and the lower-class people's voice. The story raises issues like corrupt systems, hierarchy, misuse of power, class and caste divide, corruption and crime with the aspect of how there are loopholes in it that are responsible for the sufferings of oppressed people. The journey of Balram Halwai, the novel's central character, represents some peoples' journey from darkness towards light. Through his eyes, the writer sees how the people with property exercise power over those powerless and helpless. The story of Balram Halwai is a story of true India with various perspectives that have been divulged through the seven epistles he writes to the Chinese Premiere Wen Jiabao, in the time of seven nights.

Halwai explains to Wen Jiabao the grim reality that reveals how India is divided into two halves that seems natural in practice:

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country...Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency, that

India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. (Adiga 14)

Laxmangarh, a small locality, represents the Indian villages that are full of misery, hunger, humiliation, indignities, exploitations, oppression and neglect. This is seen through the eyes of the native narrator, who belongs to the darker side. Adiga portrays before the reader a disturbing picture of the Indian villages and the poor lives the people live there. India of darkness is the land of poverty, corruption, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy, slums, filth, and crimes; indeed, it is a land of gangsters and criminals. This darker side of India surfaces as the recurring motif of the novel around which the whole plot is built. Other social issues, such as power play, rampant corruption prevalent in the socio-political scene, and the unhealthy and filthy state of the villages, are also matters of concern in the text. The rigorous familial system, caste and class divide, the oppression and exploitation of the poor by the rich, unemployment and the final resistance to it are also dealt with in the text as its other themes. Balram Halwai discusses a corrupted, miserable land with “half-baked cities built for half-baked men” (Adiga 53).

Adiga brilliantly attacks the cruel socio-cultural practices of India and its set-up, by picking up the central character of meagre birth from the lower strata of the society from a deep dark Indian village and critiquing India through his eyes. The practice of the caste and class divide is a serious concern in Adiga’s agenda. Caste and class have always been a feature of discrimination in any given society. He gives an instance of being questioned about his caste when he goes to learn to drive; “What caste are you?”.

“Halwai’. ‘Sweet-makers’, ... ‘That’s what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?’...You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs – they’re fighters, they can become drivers. You think sweet-makers can last long in fourth gear?’” (Adiga 56). However, Adiga makes his attack clear to the reader by showing Balram’s attempt to climb the ladders to enter the respectable class based on monetary wealth and social status through his ‘entrepreneurial act’ of murder and theft extends a sharp sting at the class system of India.

The Ganga, a respectable river is considered the holiest one and has religious significance in Indian society but the present status of the Ganga makes the people think over her condition. The writer refers to the Ganga as a ‘black river’. Adiga presents a distorted image of the ‘holy’ river calling it a “river of death” (Adiga 15). He warns Wen Jiabao that a dip in this holy river can fill “your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids” (Adiga 15). Throughout the narrative, the Ganga stands as a symbol of contempt and disregard the narrator has for his land and its cultural values. He says, “The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river”. (Adiga 14)

He mocks the traditions practised in India and even feels pain in his heart to see how life suffers, but death gets respect and unordinary treatment from the people. As he details the grand funeral of his mother to Jiabao explaining the ritualistic way in which her body was wrapped from head to toe in a saffron silk cloth and covered in rose petals and jasmine garlands, he

says, her death was so grand. However, her life was miserable. His words pose a critique of the cultural practice of India, which holds death as a grand event while life remains miserable.

For him, the belief of India as a free land after independence from the British is only a make-believe. He finds the ideologies and mythical beliefs that form India's consciousness too un-liberative.

Balram mocks the absurdities of the Indian minds on matters of religion and beliefs. The Stork corrects his grandson when he calls himself Azharuddin asking him to call himself Gavaskar because Azharuddin is a Muslim. The family shows indifference towards pinky madam because of only religion as Mukesh sir confesses to Ashok. Ram Persad's leaving of the house after Balram's exposing of his identity too was a matter of religion. The cultural chains over freedom are further commented upon with Halwai's allusion to the mythical story of Lord Hanuman. Indian mythology hails Hanuman as the true embodiment of bhakti for his selfless 'samarpan' to his Lords Sri Ram and Sita. However, in his social criticism, Halwai overturns the mythical idea of 'samarpan', antithetically stating it as 'servitude'. His hostility towards the Indian cultural codes is evident as he introduces Hanuman to the Chinese as the "faithful servant of God Rama", his master. He explains; "we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love and devotion" (Adiga 19). He laments that these are the beliefs the mythology has bred into them. Adiga is not happy with Indian traditions and mythical values of beliefs and customs, so he attacks them. Lamenting on his life of servitude he writes:

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man’s hands, and he will throw it back at you with a curse.... (Adiga 176)

Halwai believes that they remain slaves because they fail to understand what a good life is as the idea of perpetual servitude has been so ideologically imbibed onto their consciousness.

In his avatar as the “social entrepreneur”, Halwai unveils before the readers a harrowing picture of his village which, he says is a third of the country. He mocks the failure to provide basic facilities by the government, Calling Laxmangarh a “typical Indian village paradise”, he writes; “Ha! Electricity poles – defunct. Water tap – broken. Children- too lean and short for their age, and with over-sized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India. Yes, a typical Indian village paradise, Mr. Jiabao” (Adiga 20). A direct attack on the administrative degradation of the country is to be identified here. Adiga goes on saying further, “if the Indian village is a paradise”, the village school for Halwai “is a paradise within a paradise” (Adiga 32) with its walls decorated by the spit up of the pan eating teacher who tactfully steals the funds meant for the children’s uniforms and mid-day meals. However, the villagers never felt he was guilty because they felt that the schoolteacher had a legitimate excuse to justify his theft. If a man was not paid his salary for six months, Halwai

defends sarcastically, “You can’t expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet” (Adiga 33). His words show his indignation towards the Indian administration, and how it has been deeply rooted in corruption.

The village hospital is not only a scene of misery and pain but also a seat of unrestrained corruption. Halwai presents before his reader a poignant picture of the government hospital while narrating the death of his father. They took the dying father to the government hospital crossing the river. However, the government hospital had no doctor to treat his father. Exposing the extent of corruption and power play rampant in the sector Halwai draws a shocking picture of a filthy government hospital in the rural villages of India. An exposing of the corrupt and malfunctioning polity here can be seen as Halwai says that there were only three different foundation stones laid by three different politicians in the place of hospitals in his village, and sketches the unhygienic condition of the one they had in the neighbouring village. Though the country has a multitude of policies and programmes meant for the poor, the reachability of these aids to the deserving is questionable, thanks to the malfunctioning and corrupt system here (Adiga 47). Exposing the extent of corruption and crime prevalent in the political front of India, Halwai sarcastically calls himself the most faithful voter of India who still has not even seen the inside of a voting booth (Adiga 102). Readers come to know the corrupt system when a patient says, “There’s a government medical superintendent who’s meant to check that doctors visit village hospitals like this. Now, each time this post falls vacant, the Great Socialist let all the big doctors know that he’s having an open auction for that post. The going rate

for this post is about four hundred thousand rupees these days... There's good money in public service. (Adiga 49)

He mocks the hollowness of the whole system called democracy as he says that he owes democracy even his birthday as the authority itself declared him eighteen, on an election day (Adiga 97). The powerful political parties themselves declare a person to have reached the legal age to vote and buy his vote to favour them, consciously leaving the respected system unharmed. Balram calls this the marvels of democracy in India. He makes jest saying "...we may not have sewage, drinking water, and Olympic Gold medals, but we do have democracy" (Adiga 96) Narrating the experience of his father as a poor rickshaw puller who wanted to cast his vote on the day of the election only to get himself stamped back to the earth eventually, Halwai manifests to the reader that democracy in India is only superficial (Adiga 101-02). He records his father's words; "I've seen twelve elections – five generals, five states, two locals – and someone else has voted for me twelve times. I've heard that people in the other India get to vote for themselves – isn't that something?" (Adiga 100). In Halwai's satiric tongue; "like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh" (Adiga 98). The 'Great Socialist' who keeps himself winning elections after elections democratically, seems to have some ninety-three criminal cases to his credit with charges against offences like grand larceny, gun-smuggling, pimping, murder, rape and so on.

Unemployment and misery migrate the poor villagers to better towns in search of work and money. For the village women, the water buffalo was the

only source of income and “all their hopes were concentrated in her fatness...If she gave enough milk, the women could sell some of it, and there might be a little money at the end of the day” (Adiga 20). The village women even fall victim to the lust of the rich landlords. As the landlords owned the whole of the village - the rivers, the land, the hillside and the roads, and “fed on the village” “there was nothing left for anyone to feed on” (Adiga 26). The poor villagers are left with nothing but poverty and hunger as being always subjugated to exploitation. The dark India as being just a spectator and not a participant in the country’s march to progress stays deprived of a healthy life.

As Halwai tries to highlight, the survival of this strata often gets veiled behind the much-illuminated screen of development and prosperity that the country projects. Halwai explains to Wen Jiabao; “one fact about India is that you can take almost anything you hear about the country from the Prime Minister and turn it upside down and then you will have the truth about that thing” (Adiga 15). This unlighted face of India- the poor India, is the face forefronted in Adiga’s representation in *The White Tiger*, which appears as a paradox to the highly illuminated glorious India. Halwai writes:

Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the Darkness too – you can tell by their bodies, filthy faces, by the animal-like way they live under the huge bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the car roar past them. These homeless people... (Adiga 119-20)

Aravind Adiga, dives deeply into the socio-political situations in India and, comes up with some shocking realities. The people living in India of darkness are the land of poverty, corruption, hunger, unemployment, illiteracy, slums, filth, and crimes; indeed, it is a land of gangsters and criminals. Adiga mocks the traditions, customs and cultural practices that are ridiculous and makes the readers feel deep pain. Having money and power, Adiga finds, that few people live free and luxurious life and bully the poor people. The people living in the darker side of India are poor, they are deprived of basic facilities and even suffer to fulfil day-to-day needs.

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