

Aravind Adiga's Novel "The White Tiger": A Study In View Of Cultural Encounters

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ABSTRACT: *Aravind Adiga's novel "The White Tiger" is an authenticated document which beautifully delineates cultural encounters among various sections of the Indian society. Here, Adiga has portrayed cultural encounters within India; as we believe unity within a vast diversity is the beauty of our nation. As a matter of fact, our country has innumerable diverse cultures, as such within our nation so many cultural encounters are taking place. It is a well known fact that India is fast developing country and in this economic pursuit it has to encounter a series of cultural encounters. Besides, in the process there is a large part of India that has been ignored and these ignorant people have been compelled towards a conflict with the richer section of the society. In fact, the encounters, between the 'have' and 'have not' unfold many questions in the minds of the knowledgeable readers of the novel in question. Cultural encounters hint at the cultural homogeneity of our society. Tradition, customs, conventions, rituals etc. have been exposed to modern day prism. Cultural encounters are always associated with identity. The novelist primarily presents cultural encounters between two societies: Urban and Rural by saying an India of Light and an India of Darkness. The novel under study also portrays Indian society that is changing owing to the influence of Western society. It also highlights the inability of the rural society that cannot keep pace with Indian urban society. The rural India finds itself neglected and deprived and this has prompted the central character of the novel to indulge in revolt causing various cultural conflicts. Eventually Balram, the central character becomes a successful entrepreneur by trading all social and economic conventions of India. In this piece of work an attempt has been made to bring forth various episodes of cultural encounters portrayed by the author without having any sort of emotional inclination towards any corner what so ever it may be.*

Keywords: *Cultural encounters, Cultural homogeneity, Entrepreneur, Identity, Conventions.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian English writing has enriched English literature to a great extent. "The White Tiger" by Aravind Adiga is an epistolary novel which won manBooker Prize in 2008. The plotline of the novel has been presented in flashback style through the central character Balram in the form of mouth piece. Balram has received the information from all India Radio that the premier of China is coming to India with a keen interest to know about Bangalore and about the success of the entrepreneurs in India. Somehow Balram is able to contact the premier and he has started to narrate his own life story; how he murders Mr. Ashok and runs away with seven hundred thousand rupees to become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. This

virulent journey of Balram from Laxmangarh to Bangalore, from a weak and cowardice boy to a desperate murderous entrepreneur has witnessed many cultural encounters which have changed his mindset and his own way of looking at the complex Indian society. Balram could witness the cultural encounters from a very close quarter and as a result these have allured him to change his fortune. Initially, he was a coward but gradually and constantly he has transformed himself into a confident and successful entrepreneur once he goes through the strenuous encounters in his journey of life line. His self confidence and changed outlook are reflected in true test and colour when he writes to the premier:

“Don’t waste your money on those American books.

They are so Yesterday. I am tomorrow. 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 Galib, and a fourth fellow whose name I forget. I am a self taught entrepreneur.” [Ref(1)-Pp-6]

Balram is in light now, in other sense he is an inhabitant of Light India now, but he was born and raised in darkness. He has been very keen in observing life and its surroundings since his childhood. He is intelligent and farsighted. Everyone of his class has been trapped by the grip of darkness but it is he who tries to get out of the Rooster Coop keeping aside so-called orthodox Indian believes.

In post independence era India has achieved a lot in the economic front and at present we are in a position to compete with the world economy. But a holistic approach to our economy reveals that the condition of the poor and the downtrodden has not improved much. Everything has changed but one thing that has not changed is the everlasting poverty of the oppressed living in darkness. Aravind Adiga as the mouthpiece of the oppressed has tried to give a voice to their sufferings, hopes and aspiration in his debut novel “The White Tiger”.

2. FINDINGS

Adiga’s novel “The white Tiger” is replete with various cultural encounters within India and through this the novelist has presented inequality and injustice meted out to the poor and the oppressed by the richer section of the society. The principal character, Balram Halwi encounters a lot of cultural conflicts right from his childhood and this has caused immense change in his personality from psychological, social and economic point of view. The plotline of the novel has been designed so artistically that it can instantly attract the attention of the readers regarding social inequality and injustice heaped on the underprivileged vis-à-vis cultural diversity prevailing in our country. The author has lucidly portrayed both rural and urban society and its varied aspects. The settings of the novel rest on both rural and urban society. A number of Indian places have found mention here: Laxmangarh, Gaya, Bihar, Dhanbad, Gurgaoan, Delhi, Bangalore, etc. The issues like unemployment, poverty, corruption, rotten health and education system, caste system, cultural conflicts, dowry

system, zamindari system, superstition, illiteracy, economic disparity, justice system, prostitution, daily wage earners, unorganized labour section of the society etc. are the prime issues that attract the novelist for discussion in the novel “The White Tiger”.

A contrasting and striking scenario we could visualize once we compare and contrast urban society with that of rural society in India. In the novel “The White Tiger” Adiga mentions that in rural India there is no electricity, sewage system, pure drinking water facility, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, good schools and colleges, public transportation, health and family welfare system; while in urban India we do have all the facilities like – good roads, huge palaces, towering buildings, shopping malls, restaurants and so on. Things have changed but not in rural India. Development is there but it has not been able to touch the larger section of the society living in darkness. The change has not taken place equally all over the country. The poor work for their masters but they have not paid their due. A handful of men in this country have ruled the remaining larger section of the society. An impact of western culture is evident in Indian cities like Delhi and Bangalore. Balram is stunned to see the behavior and costume of Pinky madam and Mr. Ashok as he has witnessed such a situation for the first time in life. Though Balram does not endorse such behavior and costume, yet he keeps silent and observant. Balram hails from Laxmangarh and he is born and brought up in rural background where tradition, custom, convention and ritual matter most. Though Balram is shocked, yet he manages to cop up with the prevailing environment as he is exceptional and not like other oppressed people. Right from the childhood he has planned to come out of the rooster coop methodically hatched and nurtured by the richer section of the society against the poor. He has gone through acculturation. He is the white tiger among the thugs and idiots. He plans to outshine and outsmart the so called rich in the society. He believes that experience teaches men. He had to quit his schooling for lack of money. He works like a spider in the teashop for earning money. He could learn that the drivers are paid handsome amount and accordingly he becomes ambitious and eventually he becomes a servant cum driver of Mr. Ashok. Balram is the representative of all those inspirational rural Indians who have ambition to raise their economic status in the society but they cannot come out of the situation as they have been perpetually tied to the rooster coop by a certain section of the society. However, Balram is a versatile figure. He is humble and submissive but he is also desperate and committed to outshine the so-called rich and smart people in the society. Eventually he does not hesitate to murder his master, Mr. Ashok and becomes a successful entrepreneur. Here, we witness that Adiga has portrayed two types of India: an India of Light and an India of Darkness so that the readers find themselves under the cover of the confrontation of these two different Indian societies.

An India of Darkness refers to not so great India in this piece of writing. Economic prosperity frequently claimed is not based on facts. Millions of people of this country live below poverty line. They live in perpetual servitude, Balram Halwi, the central character of this novel represents the entire working class people. He is basically from Laxmangarh, Gaya, Bihar. In his journey of lifeline, he witnesses numerous social system, corrupt political system, cultural conflicts, religious biasness, rotten education and health system, unemployment, mall culture and so on. The author wants to hint at the situation which has been created for long in order to deprive a section of the society and this situation has been described as a great Rooster Coop. The poor and the oppressed have been trapped and tied

down to the rooster coop. They never think of running away because they think that they belong to the great Indian family, they are the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice. The desire to be a servant had been bred in them and they accept it as gift of God. In order to portray such a picture under his canvas of creation, Adiga states:

“ Everyday millions walkup at dawn stand in dirty,
crowded buses- get off at their masters’ posh
houses and then clean the floors, wash the
dishes, weed the gardens, feed their children,
press their feet all for the pittance.”[Ref(1)-Pp-176]

No doubt, Balram is exceptional here. It is a fact that Balram is born and raised in a humble background. He belongs to an India of Darkness but he is determined and resolute from the very beginning to come out of the rooster coop. He is not like others who are not willing to break the shackle of slavery; rather he has been always planning to climb on the ladder of success in life. He even wants to outshine the so called rich people in the society and as a result he faces various cultural encounters in his journey towards the India of Light. People living in India of Light are rich, developed and smart. They enjoy all the modern amenities of life. Their culture has been influenced by the Western and European culture; whereas in India of Darkness people live in utter poverty and devoid of basic amenities. In this novel Delhi and Bangalore represent India of Light; on the other hand, Laxmangarh represents India of Darkness.

Balram gets a job of a driver in the Stork’s house in Dhanbad. The Stork’s son Mr. Ashok returns from America with his luxurious wife Pinky Madam. Mr. Ashok, his brother Mukesh and the Stork are quite materialistic in their approach. They always want material progress and they don’t embody ethical values. In order to fix someone in Delhi for evading income tax Mr. Ashok, Pinky Madam and Balram move to Gurgaon, Delhi. They live in Buckingham Tower B. Mr. Ashok prefers Gurgaon because he thinks that Pinky Madam will be happy there as it is the most American part of the city with its tall buildings, shopping malls, multiplex and restaurants. The Stork family always shows false sympathy to Balram to curve down his natural instinct. They also insult him saying that the later is a part of their family. Westernisation in India is an important aspect of this novel and here Balram comes in contact with cultural conflicts on several occasions. The selfish, materialistic attitude of the Stork family comes to the fore when they frame Balram for the accident committed by heavily drunk Pinky Madam in Delhi. This incident deeply affected Balram’s mind. The mental situation of Balram has got a true reflection through the following words:

“The jails of 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 village, the masters
still own us, body, soul and arse”.[Ref(1)-Pp-169]

Again he says:

“Even to think about this again makes me so angry

I might just go out and cut the throat of some rich man right now”.[Ref(1)-Pp-169]

One evening Mr Ashok asks Balram to drive him and Pinky Madam to Connaught Place. They reach Connaught place and get down from the car. Balram remains inside the car enjoying the light of Connaught place. It is freezing cold in Delhi. All the other drivers have already left and still no sign of his masters. He closes his eyes and fancies for his dinner; a nice hot curry with juicy chunks of dark meat. Big puddle of red oil in the gravy. It is well past midnight and they come out of the restaurant and awake up Balram. Both are loud and happy and reek of some English liquor. They enter the car and begin to behave like animals. Balram feels uneasy as he is not accustomed to such behavior but he leaves no opportunity to enjoy the same like a child. He says:

“ I tell you, they were going at it like animals as I drove them out of Connaught place. He was pushing his hand up and down her thigh, and she was giggling. I watched one second too long. He caught me in the mirror”.[Ref(1)-Pp-158]

Mr. Ashok and Pinky madam return from America and they are supposed to return within three months. But Mr. Ashok is attracted towards greatly changed India (New India) and he wishes to live here in India and for the satisfaction of Pinky Madam in Gurgaon, Delhi. Pinky Madam is not at all satisfied with the Indian culture and once suddenly she leaves for America without informing Mr. Ashok. This gives immense shock to Mr. Ashok and he finds no meaning to his life and living. He drinks heavily and says:

“Why do men drink, Balram”?
I don't know, sir
Of course, in your caste you don't.....
Let me tell you, Balram
Men drink because they are sick of life.
I thought caste and religion didn't matter
any longer in today's world. My father said; No,
don't marry her, she's of another.....”[Ref(1)-Pp-185]

After this incident Mr. Ashok comes in contact with his old lover Miss Uma. They spend time together in the hotels and bars doing a lot of fun. Once, both of them drink heavily in a bar. They come out and enter into the car. While Balram driving them home they start petting and kissing inside the car. Balram doesn't like this as he thinks that Mr. Ashok has picked up a whore from the red-light area. Besides, he thinks that it is inappropriate for Mr. Ashok to enter into illicit relation without divorcing Pinky Madam. At this point Balram fumes:

“On the way back, the two of them were talking at the top of their voices; and then the petting and kissing begun. My God, and he a man who was still lawfully married to another woman! I was so

furious that I drove right through four red lights,
 and almost smashed into an oxcart that was
going down the road with a load of kerosene cans,
 but they never noticed”.[Ref(1)-Pp-208]

Again one evening while going to PVR Sarket from Sheraton Hotel Mr. Ashok puts his hands on the bare shoulders of Miss Uma and they begin to mingle inside the car which has made Balram feel uneasy. He doesn't like such type of debauchery inside the car. His upbringing has not taught him such things. His culture doesn't permit such type of open love making. Besides, he initially takes Miss Uma as a Nepali who is associated with prostitution in India and this has made him furious. Balram says:

 “Mr. Ashok put his hands on the girl's bare shoulders.
 I took my eyes away from the mirror. I have never
 approved of debauchery inside cars Mr. Jiabo. But
 I could smell the mingling of their perfumes. I knew
 exactly what was going on behind me”.[Ref(1)-Pp-203]

“ The White Tiger “ anatomises the fantastic cravings of the rich, it evokes too, with startling accuracy, the no less desperate struggles of the oppressed but in the process all the things like morality, ethics, relationship, trustworthiness, tradition, customs, conventions, etc. have totally been undermined. Almost all the characters have run after material progress, vanity and false name and fame. The richer section represented by Mr. Ashok, Mongoose, Pinky madam or the Stork (Thakur Ramdev) have indulged in corruption, debauchery, larceny, sexual pleasure and depravity. Morality and kindness have nothing do with them. They have always shown false sympathy towards Balram. In return Balram has also turned into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness. Though he does not endorse the immoral things initially but later on he is enticed to do all the immoral and unethical things throughout his life. Even he forgets his family, his granny Kusum and stops sending money to them in Laxmangarh. The society and the environment to a large extent are instrumental in shaping his character besides his craze for outshining and outsmarting the so-called rich in the society. He serves not only as a driver but also as a close aid and a servant. He also emulates them and their way of life. Balram Says:

 “All the changes happened in me because they
 happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from
 America an innocent man but life in Delhi
 corrupted him and once the master of Honda
 city becomes corrupted, how can the driver
 stay innocent”? [Ref(1)-Pp-197]

Balram from the very beginning has left behind everything like morality, ethics or trustworthiness in order to climb the ladder of material success. He believes that in this material world success has no caste, creed or religion. His success right from his spying in the tea- shop to a successful entrepreneur based on lack of loyalty, wickedness, debauchery and even murder. Adiga has ardently drawn a faithful picture of modern Indian society minus

moral. Globalisation and westernisation have left a distinct mark on Indian society where the people have perpetually run after material gain, physical comfort and sexual pleasure. Balram forgets Kusum and Kishan as he lives in Light. He hesitates to recognize his cousin Dharam as well.

3. CONCLUSION

The White Tiger” by Aravind Adiga is a virulent and strenuous journey into a new India; a journey of Balram’s life from the Darkness to Light replete with enormous cultural conflicts. His entire journey from Laxamangarh, Gaya to Bangalore via Dhanbad and Delhi is truly colorful from different perspectives and has witnessed various cultural encounters. This journey reaches to its climax by transcending all the material, cultural, and ethical aspects of life. To him emancipation of the poor and oppressed is the need of the hour and he is ready to compensate everything for this. He becomes his own master by becoming successful entrepreneur in Bangalore and to attain the same he is least repentant for the murder he has committed to his master. He attains a social status at the cost of his culture, tradition, caste, religion, belief, trustworthiness and loyalty. Finally, we can draw a bold line of conclusion that millions of white tigers are appearing and reappearing surrounding us because of the cultural conflicts between “have” and “have not” and it will continue unless we initiate proper steps against it.

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