



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Exploitation and Empowerment of the Marginalized in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on the projection of marginalized Indian in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* on account of caste and class and the ways of overcoming the exploitation and getting empowered. The title of this novel indicates the protagonist as well as the narrator, Balram Halwai. Though he is impoverished, he is unique, talented, and courageous when compared to others. On account of his family condition, he stops going to school and starts working with his elder brother in a tea shop, where he eavesdrops on the conversation of the customers, with which he elevates his life. In this novel, Adiga portrays two sides of India, such as dark and light. People who live in the light are rich, and lead a contented life by dominating the poor people. They never wish to increase the salary of their servants but, to lead a peaceful life, they bribe the higher officials to hide their illegal activities. On the other hand, many people in India live in darkness by serving the rich. They remain as servants throughout their lives due to their honesty and timidity. Often, they are mortified and suppressed by the rich but they could not go against them by expressing their anger because they know that if they do so, the rich will attack their family members. But Balram defies this ideology by refusing to endure humiliation and suppression. He determines to overcome his fear and takes a bold risk of murdering his employer, Ashok in his pursuit of success and liberation.

Keywords: Marginalization, dominating, humiliated, darkness, suppression

Aravind Adiga was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2008 for his debut novel, *The White Tiger*. Through this novel, he portrays in detail the contrasting realities of twenty-first-century India. The novel delves into themes such as social stratification, corruption, living standards, class exploitation, democratic subjugation, economic hardship, diligent servants and their devotion, and the plight of the urban and rural poor through the narrator and protagonist of this novel, Balram Halwai. Margaret Atwood says, "We all know that authors are private people, but until recently our authors were treated only as private people. Authors are also transmitters of their culture" (19). Adiga, as a writer does his job perfectly. By reading this novel, anyone who does not know about India can get a clear view of it.

As a triumphant entrepreneur in Bangalore, Balram writes about India and his life experience to Mr. Wen Jiabao, Chinese Premier, through an email in which he narrates almost everything of his journey of entrepreneurship. He reveals the actual picture of India and Indians as "our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, *does* have entrepreneurs" (Adiga 4).

Balram was born in the village of Laxmangarh, which was under the control of the four landlords mentioned in the name of animals such as the Raven, the Buffalo, the Wild Boar, and the Stork because of their wild nature. They are rich, leading a happy and luxurious life by sucking the blood of the poor as their servants. They never allow the oppressed to come up in life. These kinds of people even though they involve in illegal activities, they lead a peaceful life because of the trustworthiness of their servants who will take the blame for their master's crime. This thing is evidently clarified by Adiga as "The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (175).

Adiga states "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (14). Thus, the aristocrats, the landlords, tradesmen, statesmen, moneylenders, powerful employers, and high-positioned

government employees live in an India of Light, whereas the low-caste individuals, that is, the less fortunate such as the daily wage earners, the unemployed, and underpaid workers inhabit in an India of Darkness.

The protagonist of this novel has different names when he is a small boy, his family members call him simply Munna which means boy. Later he gets the name of Balram from his school teacher Krishna, then he gets the name of the White Tiger, which is a rare and smart animal in the jungle, from a visiting school inspector who finds him something unique from other students and inspired by his intelligence.

‘You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?’ ...

‘The White tiger.’

That’s what you are, in *this* jungle.’ (Adiga 35)

Due to the massive debt of his family, Balram is unable to resume his schooling even though he is super intelligent at his studies. Balram’s grandmother Kusum has gotten a loan from the Stork for her relative’s wedding. To pay back the debt, he is forced to drop out of school and commences working with his elder brother Kishan in a tea shop where he is educating himself by overhearing the conversation of the customers. It is where he learned many things and, in that place, he meets Mr. Ashok whom he adores the most to be his master. Balram says,

I used my time at the tea shop in Laxmangarh to spy on every customer at every table, and overhear everything they said. I decided that this was how I would keep my education going forward – that’s the one good thing I’ll say for myself. I’ve always been a big believer in education – especially my own. (Adiga 52)

His father Vikram Halwai is a rickshaw puller, a poor but hard-working man who died of tuberculosis without getting any treatment after being admitted to the government hospital. No doctors are available to attend the patients in that hospital. In India, government hospitals are built mainly to treat sick people especially the poor, but in some villages, the poor people do not get any treatment in the government hospitals mainly because of the private clinics maintained by the government doctors. This brings out the tragic state of the marginalized especially the impoverished people in villages. Vikram Halwai’s life would have been saved if the government hospital were administered properly with the best doctors.

In Dhanbad, Balram overhears a coal miner at the teashop talks of private chauffeurs getting high salaries. Later he develops an interest in driving, and also, he learns it with the permission of his grandmother Kusum by making a promise that he will give his salary to her after getting a job to run his family. After exploring various job opportunities, he secures a position as a chauffeur at the Stork’s residence. There he is not only a chauffeur but also a servant who does all the household chores. At times he plays with the children of Mukesh alias Mongoose, son of the Stork, takes care of their dogs by bathing them, and at night, he cleans the legs of the Stork in a bucket of water, and gives massages too. This is the pitiful state of the most Indian chauffeurs.

The first driver of the Stork’s family is Ram Persad who drives Honda City Whereas Balram, their second driver drives Maruti Suzuki. One fine day Balram listens to the discussion among the Stork and his sons Mukesh and Ashok. He comes to know that they are doing an unlawful coal business. To hide this matter, they are planning to go to Delhi to bribe some important politicians and they will be taken to Delhi in a car by the first driver. However, Balram wishes to go with them as the first driver.

Balram observes that in recent days Ram Persad behaved strangely by cooking at night, eating alone and going somewhere at the same time each evening. This makes Balram’s suspicion higher on Ram Persad to gather some information about him. In that process, he finds that Ram Persad gets the job by telling a lie that he is a Hindu but actually he is a Muslim. By knowing this truth, Balram frightens Ram Persad, so he quits the job. Then Balram easily becomes the first driver. As envisioned, he has got the opportunity to drive the Honda City and become the driver of the Stork’s younger son Mr. Ashok. Thus, Balram accompanies his employer Mr. Ashok, and his wife, Pinky Madam on their journey to Delhi. Here, Balram’s personality gradually comes to light. To attain his desire of becoming the first driver, he does not show any sympathy towards Ram Persad who tells a lie chiefly to get a job to run his family.

Balram says, “I would drive them wherever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant-god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress, Ram and Sita” (Adiga 46). This shows his compliance and loyalty towards them as the other servants of India. In Delhi, Balram stays in servant quarters with other servants while his masters stay in an apartment. When Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam go shopping, Balram has to wait outside for hours together because poor people like him are not allowed inside the shopping mall. He has to endure the pollution, cold, and the bite of mosquitoes during his wait for the masters. This is the condition of other chauffeurs all over India. The Mongoose before going to Delhi tells Balram strictly that he should avoid taking a car for his own purpose, do not use the Air Conditioner

for his own self, and furthermore, do not listen to songs when Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam are not using the car. This shows that according to the rich man's point of view, the marginalized should not have any rights to enjoy luxurious life and they cannot allow them to have such things in their lives.

One night the drunken Pinky Madam drives the car and unknowingly kills a child. The Mongoose praises Balram that he is like one of his family members in order to accept the crime committed by Pinky Madam. When masters do any crime, their servants should accept the punishment for them. This shows the pitiable condition of the helpless poor servants in India. Balram ponders about this incident all over the night. But fortunately, the problem is solved since there is no witness to the accident.

After the accident Pinky Madam thinks of giving some amount of money to the affected family but the idea is not liked by the Mongoose because he offers to give money only as a bribe to higher officials for their own benefit but is not interested to give an excess of one rupee to their servants, be it a salary or compensation. Pinky leaves Mr. Ashok to New York. Before leaving she gives a letter for Ashok to Balram that she is leaving him permanently and also a gift of four thousand and seven hundred rupees to Balram. When Ashok sees the letter, he becomes enraged and shows it to Balram. Later Ashok begins to go to bars and clubs at night. Afterward, until the Mongoose arrives in Delhi, Balram takes the responsibility for attending to Mr. Ashok in lieu of Pinky Madam.

From the older drivers, Balram seeks advice to deceive his master. He starts cheating his master by stealing petrol from the car and selling it, getting extra charges for repairing the car by giving it to the known mechanics, and when the car is not used by his master, he uses it as a freelance taxi. Ashok discovers that the current government has received fewer votes in the election compared to the opposition, including the Great Socialist Party. Since they neglected to bribe the winning parties, Anand decides to fix the mess by meeting two of the Great Socialists representatives and one of them is Vijay, Balram's childhood hero. Ashok promises them to pay a large sum of money.

With Johnny Walker Black Whiskey, Vijay and his companion discuss in the car how to get money from Ashok and to launch their election party in Bangalore. Balram takes the used Whiskey bottle and makes it into a sharp weapon by breaking it on the pavement to kill his master, Ashok. By returning home, his cousin Dharam waits with a letter given by Kusum stating to arrange for his marriage in his absence. Even Dharam's arrival does not make any changes in the mindset of Balram in killing his master.

Balram is "destined not to stay a slave" (Adiga 41) and he says that these days there are "only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up" (Adiga 64). When Mr. Ashok goes with cash to bribe a politician, Balram poses that the car breaks down and so Mr. Ashok gets down from the car. On that time Balram kills him by hitting him on his head using a broken whiskey bottle. Then Balram escapes with a red Italian leather bag which contains seven lakh rupees. He goes to Bangalore with that money and becomes an unbeatable entrepreneur by starting a taxi company for call center employees under his master's name Ashok Sharma.

Mr. Ashok treats Balram considerably better than the other members of the Stork's family. Over and above, Balram adores Mr. Ashok. However, Balram's circumstances demand him to take the huge step of murdering Mr. Ashok, as he can no longer endure the burden of servitude. At the same time, he ventures to meet up with the end. "The police searched for me in darkness: but I hid myself in light" (Adiga 118). Through his intelligence and money, he escapes from the murder case. After becoming a successful entrepreneur, he is having a plan to start a real estate business and also to open a school for poor children like him so that they will not face any difficulties that he overcame at his young age.

Adiga shows the life of the marginalized people through Balram. The way he projects the marginalized is quite different from the other Indian novelists. Generally, Indian novelists show the lives of marginalized people, their sufferings, predicaments, and their efforts to control the hurdles through honesty. But Adiga shows Balram, one of the marginalized twenty-first-century figures of this novel, comes up in life by committing a murder that of his master. Despite living in a democratic country, he is treated like a slave. It's been many years since India got independence but still, the Indian low-class servants' lives depend on their masters. Balram encounters a lot of humiliation, vicious treatment, and suppression all over his life mainly because of being born into a poor low caste family which is not his mistake but an unfortunate destiny. No one in this world can determine their birth and death. It is not in anyone's hand but one can change the destiny in the meantime between birth and death. Though he is born into a poor family, with hard work and some smart work, he changes his dejected and pathetic life into a sophisticated life.

Balram is shown as a person who does not have any close relationship even with his family members because that may turn him weak. This is one of the main reasons that makes him take the risk of killing his master Mr. Ashok, "only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed, hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters – can break out of the coop" (Adiga 178). Many servants in India are

caught in the Rooster Coop because of fear about their families. The employers of India tend to know all the personal details of their employees, especially about their family so that they can threaten them in the name of the family when they do anything wrong. Though the Stork and the Mongoose know about his family, Balram wants to liberate himself from the coop.

Exploitation is a key element that makes Balram become an entrepreneur. Kusum, Balram's grandmother, exploited him by sending him to work at a young age in order to get money from him to run the family. She sends him to work in a teashop to run her huge family, later she allows him to learn driving with a demand to give her the salary after getting a job. She also demands him to get married to get dowry from the bride's family. There is no love, care, or affection in their relationships. Also in his family, water buffaloes are the major source of income so they are treated much better than humans. As a chauffeur, he is utilized by his masters to do all kinds of work at their home for a low salary. Mukesh also exploits Balram by making him accept the murder done by Pinky Madam.

When Balram realizes his life that he is not truly loved by anyone, and no one has shown any mercy towards him, he prepares himself to take risks in his life. He is the kind of man who plans everything perfectly because he is a good observer who keenly observes everything that happens around him. He is not a man who gets knowledge from school or college but he educates himself from real-life experiences. Adiga portrays Balram as a man with a progressively expanding vision. Balram "sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today'" (Adiga 319).

Adiga also shows the gradual development of Balram, the marginalized, since his childhood. Balram tells, "Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. I don't treat them like servants – I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone" (Adiga 302). After becoming an entrepreneur, Balram reflects certain qualities similar to his masters such as bribing the police to hide the accident made by his driver and in an attempt to save his driver, he visits the deceased person's home, gives them twenty-five thousand rupees, and offers their older son a job as a driver. He tries to give money in order to compensate a person's life. Since he was mistreated by his masters some years back, now he could understand the pain of his servants. So, he never mistreats his servants, at the same time, he does not maintain any close relationship with them.

Thus, in *The White Tiger*, Adiga presents his protagonist, Balram as a rare and exceptional figure much like the elusive white tiger. Despite being marginalized due to his caste and class, like many other Indian servants, Balram distinguishes himself by achieving success where others do not. The way he goes might be wrong but he deserves all the qualities of an entrepreneur because he is a man who always has future plans. He represents the voice of the voiceless, and serves as a pioneer of empowerment within marginalized communities.

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