

A Socio-Psychological Study of 'The Second Coming' in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Aravind Adiga's Man Bookerprize (2008) winning debut novel *The White Tiger* unearths the ever widening gap of inequality and disparity between a selective few city entrepreneur from the world of light and the underprivileged masses belonging to the world of darkness of backward villages of India. In the competitive postmodern age of rapid technological advancement and fast growing economy, influenced by and depending on the trend of neo-liberal Globalization, the major developing eastern countries like India and China are trying to follow the western model of economic development irrespective of their demographic statistics. India, a 'Freedom-Loving Nation' like China, is struggling hard to keep pace with the other developed western countries but fails to provide an all-inclusive justifying strategic policy to the undeveloped, deprived, suppressed and frustrated inhabitants of the dark world, the 'brown men', who like Balram, the protagonist of the novel *The White Tiger*, are desperately looking for their 'freedom' from servitude and to have a dignified place in the shining world of a privileged few.

The novel is written in the form of epistles written by Balram to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, who was about to visit India to meet some Indian entrepreneurs to hear the story of their success. The protagonist declares that "Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English", the language of the dominating developed countries. He sarcastically states that the Chinese are far ahead of Indians in every respect, except having entrepreneurs. Adiga has courage for the exploration of dark realities of rising India. His protagonist was agitated with the international protocol of welcoming the Chinese Premier at the airport with "garlands, small take-home sandalwood statues of Gandhi, and a booklet full of information about India's past, present, and future". Then Balram, the man of action, decides to present the dark reality of rising India by revealing his success story of becoming techno-savvy entrepreneur in India, in 'English'. Balram writes to Chinese Premier that he admires only three nations: China, Afghanistan, and Abyssinia, that never let themselves be ruled by foreigners. He also asks the Premier not to waste his money on American business books like *Ten Secrets of Business Success!* etc. as "They're so *Yesterday*". He believes that the future of the world lies with 'the yellow man', the great Chinese lover of 'freedom and individual liberty', and 'the brown man', exceptional, rare Indian like him who dare break free from servitude and became an entrepreneur and a thinking man after murdering his master. The thought provoking story of his transformation from an innocent villager to a murderer justifying his crime raises certain fundamental questions on the socio-economic and cultural aspects of our divisive Indian societies, the more widening gap of inequality and disparity between the rich and the poor, and most importantly the humiliating, exploitative and inhumane attitude of the master class toward the working class.

Balram was born to an impoverished Halwai family living in the village Laxmangarh, a dark place untouched by any sign of development like drinking water,

electricity, sewage system, public transport and the civic sense of discipline or hygiene. Balram wonders if Buddha had ever passed through his village, if yes, he might have hurriedly run across it. The poor villagers had to pay in cash or kind to the four mighty lords of the village for every kind of facility they avail of. Each of them got his name from the peculiarities of his appetite. The fishermen had to pay a cut of every catch of fish and boatmen a toll to the Stork, the owner of the river. His brother, the Wild Boer, owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. Those willing to work on his land had to bow down to his feet and accept his wages. The Raven owned the worst, dry, rocky hillside land and took a cut from the goatherds who brought their flocks for grazing there. If they did not have money to pay the Raven, "he liked to dip his beak into their backsides". The Buffalo, who had "eaten up the rickshaws and the roads", was the greediest of them and the rickshaw pullers had to pay him one-third of whatever they earned for using his roads. It is out of this misery that Balram's father, a rickshaw-puller, made a *plan*, the plan to send his son to the school for acquiring the power of education. His father, 'a human beast of burden', uttered that, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine - at least one- should live like a man" (30). So he sent his son Munna to the school where the boy was named Balram by his school master. During a surprise inspection, a school official calls him a "white tiger", the rarest of the animals, for his extraordinary intelligence. But his father's plan failed, and he was forced to drop out of school and work in a tea shop to earn livelihood. He acts as eavesdropper and listens to the customers talking about chauffeur salaries. His real education starts from this information. Even as a boy he could see what was beautiful in the world and decides not to stay a slave forever. He learnt professional driving and was ready to begin a new life in Delhi.

Balram enters the city of light as an honest and innocent driver but gradually his integrity shatters. In spite of his wholehearted services to his masters their attitude is insensitive and humiliating. Though Mr. Ashok was quite considerate for Balram, the complexities of socio-economic disparity and helplessness to remain a suppressed servant only eventually results in the remarkable change in the psyche of Balram. He was a devoted servant who considered himself as Hanuman and Mr. Ashok and his wife as Lord Ram and Goddess Seeta respectively while driving them in Honda city car. On one of his returns to Laxmangarh he went to Black Fort up the hill and after looking down at the village he *spat* again and again, and then, while whistling and humming came back down the hill. He was contented to begin his new life as a chauffeur. His re-education begins as he watches Delhi from the driving seat of the car. "The capital of ... glorious nation" is a revelation of the contrast in the living standards of the poor and the rich. He observes huge apartments, shopping malls, call centers and traffic jam that expose the complexities of the metro-city life. He tells the Premier that:

See, this country, in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo. A clean, well-kept, orderly zoo. Everyone in his place, everyone happy.... The man called Halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows. The untouchable cleaned faces...

And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on the fifteenth of August, 1947- the day the British left- the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies...

To sum up- in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.

And only two destinies: eat- or get eaten up. (63-64)

He observes rich people living in big colonies like Defense Colony, Greater Kailash or Vasant Kunj and miserable poor one living on the sides of the road and under the bridges.

Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the Darkness too- you can tell by their thin 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. (119-120)

Balram was already aware of the treatment his village men received on their arrival to Laxmangarh from their working cities like Dhanabad. Most of the men were earning livelihood in nearby cities leaving women, children and milk giving buffalos behind where Buffalos were first to be fed. After handing over their earnings to wives they would have had the meal. Here in Delhi Balram was looking for some space in his place of work. Once Pinky madam asked him play badminton with her. He could not do that. Madam called him *useless* and his place was taken by driver number one Ram Prasad. Balram feels insulted and questions that, "Is there any hatred on earth like the hatred of the number two servant for the number one?" (77)

Mr. Ashok's brother whom Balram calls The Mongoose warns and gives instructions to him- "You know those bronze statues of Gandhi and Nehru that are everywhere? The police had put cameras inside their eyes to watch for the cars. They are seeing everything you do, understand?"

Further:

'The air conditioner should be turned off when you are on your own'; 'Music should not be played when you are on your own', and 'At the end of each day you must give us a reading of the meter to make sure you haven't been driving the car on your own.' (141)

But when he watches Mr. Ashok transporting bribes for his father, Balram decides to overcharge him for petrol and car repairs. He learns the amoral culture and ways of deceiving the masters from other drivers. Mr. Ashok embraces new vices, and so does Balram. Gradually he develops a kind of feeling of hatred and revenge for the wrongdoings of his master. He had to wait outside the mall for hours and is tempted to visit it someday. Once he enters a mall in black shoes and white T shirt "with only one English word on it". He sees guards in grey uniforms on every floor and it seemed to him as if all of them were watching him only. He is afraid that at any time one of them

would catch him and say, "Hey! That man is a paid driver! What's he doing in here?" (152). The experience becomes traumatic for him as he states that "It was my first taste of the fugitive's life". The mall culture, his interaction with other drivers while waiting outside and the crime magazine *Murder Weekly* add new dimensions to his consciousness. His sensuousness at the repeated exposure of Pinky Madam's western outfit also becomes troublesome and disturbing as expressed:

The moment the Mongoose left, I swear, the skirts became even shorter.

When she sat in the back, I could see half her boobs hanging out of her clothes each time I had to look in the rearview mirror.

This put me in a very bad situation, Sir. For one thing, my beak was aroused, which is natural in a healthy young man like me. On the other hand, as you know, master and mistress are like father and mother to you, so how can you get excited by the mistress?

I simply avoided looking at the rearview mirror. If there was a crash, it wouldn't be my fault.

...Each time she came in with that low black dress, my beak got big. I hated her wearing that dress; but I hated my beak even more for what it was doing. (143)

Unaware of Balram's dilemma Pinky Madam missed no chance to scold him. She asked him that, "Stop scratching your groin with your left hand!", and goes on shouting at him- "You're so filthy! Look at your teeth, look at your clothes! There's red *paan* all over your teeth, and there are red spots on your shirt. It's disgusting! Get out-clean up the mess you've made in the kitchen and get out." (146)

Balram was full of remorse. He broods:

"Why had my father never told me not to scratch my groin? Why had my father never taught me to brush my teeth in milky foam? Why had he raised me to live like an animal? Why do poor live amid such filth, such ugliness?"

Brush. Brush. Spit.

Brush. Brush. Spit.

If only a man could spit his past out so easily. (151)

Balram reveals to the Chinese Premier that in India neither there is dictatorship nor secret police because there we have the *coop*. He compares the condition of servants, poor and underprivileged with the rooster coop situation:

Go to Old Delhi. Behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench - the stench of terrified, feathered flesh... They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.

The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (173-174)

Further:

...A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude as strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will through it back at you with a curse.

...the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice, the subject of no doubt considerable space in the pamphlet that the prime minister will hand over to you, *the Indian family*, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop. (176)

Balram alias the white tiger wants to break this rooster coop because he decides not to remain a slave. The situation ripens when one night after having drenched in a party, Pinky Madam drives the car and runs over something in the road – possibly a child. Balram drives home and cleans the car thoroughly to remove any evidence. On his return the Stork orders Balram to bear the responsibility of the accident and forces him to sign a legal document confessing that he has run over the child. Although no report is ever filed, Balram learns that his employers, whom he regards as parents, are not considerate for his interests. A feeling of hatred towards the master-class is generated in his mind. His grudge is revealed:

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 villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse....The judges? Wouldn't they see through this obviously forced confession? But they are in the racket too. They take their bribe, they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And life goes on.

For everyone but the driver. (170)

But now it is Balram's turn to own his master's body. When Mr Ashok withdraws a large amount of seven hundred thousand rupees from the bank; enough money for Balram to buy a house, a motorbike, and a small shop to start a new life; after a great conflict between loyalty and disloyalty, honesty and dishonesty he resolves to murder Mr Ashok. He did that and starts the entrepreneurship in Bangalore, and also adopts the name of his master. Now he is Ashok Sharma, founder of taxi fleet called "White Tiger Drivers".

Apparently his act of murdering his master whom he had been taking all care of after Pinky Madam left him seems unconvincing. But a deep analysis of his experiences with Mr Ashok explores the dynamics of such a violent transformation. Whenever they get a chance the servants let out their frustration in "A time-honoured servants' tradition. Slapping his master when he's sleep. Like jumping on pillows when masters are not around. Or urinating into their plants. Or beating or kicking their pet dogs. Innocent servants' pleasures" (184-85). In the case of Balram the magnitude of response got increased.

Balram's master was weary of his family business and his personal life, and questions the purpose of his meaningless existence. Mr Ashok, while drunk but awake, asks Balram, 'Drive me', 'Anywhere you want. To the malls. To the hotels. Anywhere.'

Further: 'Sometimes I wonder, Balram. I wonder what's the point of living. I really wonder...'

The point of living? My heart pounded. The point of your living is that if you die. Who is to pay me three and a half thousand rupees a month? (186)

This is the other side of the coin. In the present globalized world of power and economy man has lost the real purpose and meaning of life. Pankaj Mishra alludes to the contradictions of economic globalization which "by fostering rapid growth in some sectors of the economy raises expectations everywhere, but by distributing its benefits narrowly, expands the population of the disenchanting and frustrated" (58). The discontentment is on either sides which is adequately expressed in the words of Edward Luce that, "India's economy offers a schizophrenic glimpse of a high-tech 21st century future amid a distressingly medieval past" (58). Balram learns a new morality at the heart of a new India. Adiga recognizes that the economic decline in the West is mirrored by a rise in the East in Balram's conviction that he is tomorrow... The glorious twenty first century man... The century, more specifically, of the yellow and the brown man. Balram's sardonic voice and acute observation of the social order are unsettling but thought provoking. Does the gruesome action of Balram indicate towards a latent volcano of discontent brewing in the heart of underprivileged to erupt at any time? Is some revelation, 'The Second Coming', is at hand. New India needs the answer.

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