

**Master-servant relationship in Adiga's *The White Tiger*****Muzifar Yousuf**

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**Abstract**

*This paper explores the master-servant relationship in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* which is the winner of reputed Man Booker Prize in 2008. Adiga was born on 23 October, 1974. He is an Indo Australian writer, who studied English Literature at Columbia College, Columbia University in New York and Oxford. He begins his career as a financial journalist working for *The Financial Times*. He has written not only for it but also for *Money Magazine* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Obviously his articles are about stock market and investment. Later he joined *Time Magazine* and worked as a South Asia correspondent from 2003-05. Besides it, he has written business and news articles about India for American and British newspapers. This job took him everywhere in India and provided him an opportunity to listen the murmur of Indian lower class with keen interest that too in full detail. Later on the same he expressed in his novel *The White Tiger* in which the main theme is the master-servant relationship. Adiga takes for this study a sample from a rural landlord's family and their attitude and treatment of their servant. Through it he highlights the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor and the economic system. Consequently it leads to injustice and inequality, which finally results in social discontent and violence.*

**Keywords:** opulent, humiliation, entrepreneurship, servitude, mundane, Laxmangarh, siphoning, vengeance

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Adiga calls the landlord Strok ironically; he has two sons Ashok and Mukesh. The later one is always referred as (Mongoose) another critical name. Balram's master Ashok lives in a new apartment called Buckingham towers A Block, which is one of the best in Delhi. Ashok spent a lot of time visiting malls, along with Pinky Madam, his wife and Mongoose his brother. Balram's job is also to carry all the shopping bags as they come out of the malls. Though they have a luxurious life style yet they mean and stingy at heart. It is shown through the lost coin episode where Mukesh insults Balram for not having retrieved a rupee coin he lost while getting out of the car. He is so bothered about a rupee coin after bribing someone with a million rupees but still says to Balram:

Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car: I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee. 'What do you mean, it's not there? Don't think you steal from us just because you're in the city. I want that rupee. We're just paid half a million rupees in a bribe, Mukesh, and now we're screwing this man over for a single rupee. Let's go up and have a Scotch! Said Ashok ( Adiga, 139: 2008).

Such a mean behavior of masters is continuing when they instruct the servants about do and don'ts. Balram is told never to switch on the A.C or play music when he is alone.

Taunting Balram for his lack of an English education is great fun for Ashok and Pinky Madam. It patches up their quarrels when he mispronounces “Maal” for “mall” they have their ironic laughter. The Pizza episode is similar in nature. On Pinky Madam’s birthday, Balram is made to dress up like a Maharaja with a red turban, dark cooling glasses and is made to serve them food. The lady to amuse herself trapped Balram to repeat Pizza as Balram always pronounced it Pijja.

In his service to master Ashok, Balram experiences many things, like to take his master on drive in order to meet the ministers to bribe them so that his business should run smoothly. Besides he takes him to prostitutes. In his home, he washes utensils, brooming the floors, cooking meals, massages Mongoose, scrubbing, sell drugs, and read with full enthusiasm *Murder Weekly*. It is in the mundane descriptions that Adiga is at his evocative best. Sample, for instance, Adiga on Balram’s feelings about the foot massage:

I had to heat water on the stove, carry it into the courtyard, and then lift the old man’s feet up one after the other and immerse them in the hot water and then massage them both gently; as I did this, he would close his eyes and moan... After an hour, he would say, “The water’s gone cold’- The water into it was dark- dead hair and bits of skin floated on it. I had to fill the bucket with fresh hot water, and bring it back I washed my hands for ten minutes, and dried them, and washed them again, but it made no difference. No matter how much you wash your hands after you have massaged a man’s foot, the smell of his old, flanky skin will stay for an entire day. (Adiga, 70: 2008).

Such disgusting jobs are loathsome but helpless servants have to carry them out. Clearly Adiga portrays the master-servant relationship in all its inherent sadism, beyond the pietistic ritual it is taken to be.

In the company of Ashok he (Balram) moves in the illuminated zones of Delhi as the car's driver but is consigned to the murky depths of the city's underbelly, a dichotomy aptly mirrored in the multi-storied apartment with its basement. He is witness in Delhi to the carefree, opulent and selfish lives lived by the elite on whom he wants to wreak his revenge. For Balram, entrepreneurship is first and foremost about wanting a way out of his servitude. Moral Darkness among the upper class is revealed through another pathetic incident. Once, Ashok's wife kills a gypsy child on the road in drunken driving. They persuade Balram to take the responsibility of the accident. He has to suffer humiliation at the hands of his masters. He is forced to sign a statement accepting full responsibility for the accident and says:

I Balram Halwai, son of Vickram 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 or objects, on the night of January 23<sup>rd</sup> this year. That there were no other occupants of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened. I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.  
(Adiga, 168: 2008).

This incident reflects how poor servants are exploited for the selfish ends of their masters. Another inhuman treatment of the master towards the servant is to keep him on

waiting for long hours till very late in the evening. Balram is even bitten by mosquitoes while waiting to his master. Ashok is not least bothered about his servant waiting on him till he returns very late at 2:00 a.m in the morning. His master sends him to bring English wine for him; there he has to wait hours in front of the wine shop for his turn. He brings whisky for his master because he is accustomed to it. Pinky Madam exploits him by his caste. By caste he is Halwai. In order to get her work done, she says him you are a Halwai. You can cook and make tea very well. In the company of his master Balram is made aware about dark things to which poor people in majority are not accustomed to. The sea of change occurs in Balram: first as a student in rural school of Laxmangarh and then as a driver in his master's home because he treats him so badly. The worst part of being a driver is, Balram narrates:

The worst part of being a driver is that you have hours to yourself while waiting for your employer. You can spend this time chit-chatting and scratching your grain. You can read murder and rape magazines. You can develop the chauffeur's habit-it's a kind of yoga, really of putting a finger in your nose and letting your mind go blank for hours (they should call it the 'bored driver's asana'). You can sneak a bottle of Indian liquor into the car-boredom makes dumb of so many honest drivers. (Adiga, 149: 2008).

While in Delhi Balram is in the service of his master, experiences two kinds of India with those who are eaten and those who eat, prey and predators. Balram decides to be an eater, someone with a big belly, and the novel tracks the way in which ambition plays out (Walters). The key metaphor in the novel is the "Rooster coop". In the coop Balram is caged like the chicken. In order to come out of the coop the white tiger has to break out the cage in order to make himself free from the traditional bondages.

Go to old Delhi... and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly in to wire-mesh cages... they see the organs of their brother 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. (Adiga, 173-174: 2008).

Such an image stirs his soul wildly. He does not want to suffer helplessly. Instead of being a victim he decides to become a perpetrator. The unfair treatment of his master darkens his conscience. He decides to kill him and rob his 7,00,000. At first he remains in dilemma because such a bold step seems various dangerous. The author peeps into his subconscious as he plans to loot 7,00,000 stuffed into the red bag. Here author says:

Go on, just look at the red bag, Balram, -that's not stealing, is it? I shook my head. And even if you were to steal it, Balram, it wouldn't be stealing. How so? I looked at the creature in the mirror. See Mr. Ashok is giving money to all these politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay. And who owns that tax, in the end? Who but the ordinary people of this country- You! (Adiga, 244: 2008).

The money is more than sufficient for him to begin a new life along with a house fitted with modern equipments and luxurious things. It is the dream of every poor man to have enough to eat and look like a rich person. Most importantly it can free him from the rooster coop, the suppressed life of servitude that seems to be chocking his soul. In fact, the mater himself encourages his servant's stealing habit by paying him low wages. Adiga makes the protagonist spell out the way enterprising drivers make a little extra money by siphoning

petrol and selling, repairing the car under a corrupt mechanic who gives inflated bills, studying his master's habits and capitalize on his carelessness, risking to make his master's car into a freelance taxi. Balram thought of a confession because of these misdeeds, but instead of guilt he felt "Rage the more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me". (Adiga, 230: 2008).

On the surface level the master-servant relationship in *The White Tiger* seems a good relationship but when delved deep we find that though Mr. Ashok does not hit or spit on Balram, but he makes him responsible for the killing of a child, who actually is killed by his wife. Mr. Ashok gives him 4,000 rupees a month but it is too meager to live on in a city. These things compel him to hatch his plot and the consequent theft and murder. The stream of consciousness leads him to justify his plans of murder with growing meanness of Ashok in treating him. Once Ashok thinks that Balram needs some money to get married:

I understand, Balram: You want to get married: 'Balram. You'll need some money, won't you?' 'Sir, no. there's no need of that.' 'Wait, Balram. Let me take out my wallet. You're a good member of the family. You never ask for more money-I know that other drivers are constantly asking for over time and insurance: but you never say a word. You're old-fashioned. I like that. We'll take care of all wedding expenses, Balram. Here, Balram-here's-here's-I saw him take out a thousand-rupee note, put it back, then take out a five-hundred, then put it back, and take out a hundred, which he handed to me". (Adiga, 257-258: 2008).

Such a mean and ironic behavior on the part of Ashok drives Balram crazy for vengeance. It shows the gap between the upper and lower class. Balram is so much disgusted of the life of a slave that he never feels guilty of Ashok's murder. He wants to experience

“Just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant”. (Adiga, 231: 2008). Accordingly, Balram murders Ashok in Delhi one rainy evening on a lonely stretch of road with a broken wine bottle. He attacks him on head and the broken bottle eats his bone. He then turns up in Bangalore, the hub of India’s silicon revolution and sets up his THE WHITE DRIVERS and becomes a part of the booming IT industry in that city. He becomes an owner and a master. He turns out to be different kind of master. In his system everybody is satisfied and everybody is given justice. There is also no concept of colour, caste and creed with his system in running the transportation in Bangalore.

At last he becomes an entrepreneur at the cost of his whole family who most probably are killed by Ashok’s family. There in the Bangalore like a philosopher, he says:

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. I don’t insult any of them by calling them my ‘family’ either. They’re my employees; I’m their boss, that’s all. I make them sign a contract and I sign it too, and both us must honour that contract. That’s all, if they notice the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I keep things clean, they’ll go up in life, if they don’t they’ll be drivers all their lives. (Adiga, 302: 2008).

Being a master Balram is different from his own master. Every this is fair in his policy. He never betrays his servants. He is not traditional in the treatment he gives to his servants. He is pragmatic in approach, stresses independence and self respect. On the other hand his own master Ashok describes his tendency to deceive and manipulate others for his own purpose. There has been no good intention in Ashok for the amelioration of society but Balram dreams of establishing a school for poor children in Bangalore where he could train



them in facts of life. According to him, it should be the school where all round development is possible. It is because he remained himself “half-backed”. Life has taught him how to treat others. He knows the importance of other people because he is treated like a sub human. He has learned as a servant how to tackle the situations in the odd times. He knows how to corrupt the government officials for his own benefit. There is a lot of difference between Ashok and Balram as masters. In case of Ashok inner darkness is revealed out but at the same time Balram is well wisher of others. Balram gets transformed from “Munna” to Balram to driver to successful entrepreneur. He also fails to abolish darkness from the society. He does not challenge the life of corruption of the upper castes. His freedom from the bondages of servitude is only a single man’s freedom but not of the whole underclass people.

In Indian society servitude is completely mixed up with the blood of poor section of the society. They consider it sin to betray the masters. They remain sincere with their masters till their last breath and never change mind about it. They remain content with whatever they earn through honest ways. It is very shocking that their masters do not show a least concern to them. They always have to follow their master’s command and they do not have their individual choices. Their honesty is the most important factor in them to be with their masters. They remain honest in critical conditions:

Watch the roads in the evenings in Delhi; sooner or later you will see a man on a cycle-rickshaw, pedaling down the road, with a giant bed, or a table, tied to the cart that is attached to his cycle. Everyday furniture is delivered to people’s homes by this man- the deliveryman. A bed costs five thousand rupees, may be six thousand. Add the chairs, and a coffee table, and it’s ten or fifteen thousand. A man comes on a cycle-cart, bringing you this bed, table,

and chairs, a poor man who may make five hundred rupees a month. He unloads all this furniture for you, and you give him the money in cash- a fat wad of cash the size of a brick. He puts it into his pocket, or into his shirt, or into his underwear, and cycles back to his boss and hands it over without touching a single rupee of it! A year's salary, two years' salary, in his hands, and he never takes a rupee of it. (Adiga, 174: 2008).

Ever since the poor section of Indian Society is being suppressed by the privilege class from ages. They are marginalized because the condition is so created for the poor in which, they are always ready to serve their masters with utmost honesty and sincerity. They are bound to the servitude that is why they cannot recognize the beauty of things in the world. They have no status in the society, if they have any that is to being a servant. They are blindly trusted by Indians that is their unique quality:

But leave a million dollars a million dollars in front of a servant and he won't touch a penny. Try it: leave a black bag with a million dollars in a Mumbai taxi. The taxi driver will call the police and return the money by the day's end. I guarantee it. (Whether the police will give it to you or not is another story, sir!) Masters trust their servants with diamonds in this country! It's true. Every evening on the train out of Surat, where they run the world's biggest diamond-cutting and polishing business, the servants of diamond merchants are carrying suitcases full of cut diamonds that they have to give to someone in Mumbai. Why doesn't that servant take the suitcase full of diamonds? He's no Gandhi, he's human, he's you and me. But he's in the Rooster Coop. The

trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. (Adiga, 175: 2008).

## Conclusion

In summary, *The White Tiger* presents a sharp insight into the master-servant relationship in the Indian context. It focuses on the insensitive treatment of servants by their masters. Excessive exploitation can have a fatal outcome.

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