

Social Realism Redefined : A Critical Study of The White Tiger

by Arvind Adiga

Aparna

Asst. Professor, Dept. of English
C.R.M. Jat College, Hisar

Abstract

Realism, as a literary genre, is associated with depicting the life faithfully on literary canvas. In Indian English Literature, the trinity of Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, and Raja Rao was credited with keeping the flame of social realism alive in 20th century. Their works reflected prominent realistic themes like untouchability, child labour, poverty, exploitation by landlords, dowry, helplessness of women, class distinction, breaking of joint family system and caste system etc. But with the turn of 21st century, new crop of authors like Arvind Adiga turned the tide of realism in hitherto unexplored realms of drugs, diseases like HIV, social mobility, Institutional corruption, globalization, entrepreneurship etc, without jeopardizing the vivid presentation of recurrent themes like hunger, poverty, and exploitation of the downtrodden. His present novel, The White Tiger, successfully sketches these new dimensions of social realism through an amalgam of characters.

Keywords--Social Realism, the White Tiger, Globalization, Entrepreneurship, Institutional Corruption, Light vs Darkness.

Realism is an approach that attempts to describe life in its entirety shorn of idealism, romanticism. It is a style of writing that gives the impression of recording or 'reflecting' faithfully an actual way of life. Realism in literature is the theory or practice of fidelity to nature, or to real life and to accurate representation without idealization of everyday life. The 18th century works of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett are among the earliest examples of realism in English literature. It was consciously adopted as an aesthetic programme in France in the mid 19th century, when interest arose in recording previously ignored aspects of contemporary life and society. The same wind blew to Indian literary firmament. The authors of the ilk of K.S.Venkatramani, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K.Narayan scoured the surroundings to introduce and adopted any traces of realism or social insight in their novels. In Indian English Literature, the trinity of Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan, and Raja Rao was credited with keeping the flame of social realism alive in 20th century. Their works reflected prominent realistic themes of the untouchability, miseries, child labour, poverty, exploitation by landlords, dowry, helplessness of women, class distinction, breaking of joint family system and caste system etc. But with the turn of 21st

century, new crop of authors like Arvind Adiga turned the tide of realism in hitherto unexplored realms of drugs, diseases like HIV, social mobility, Institutional corruption, globalization, entrepreneurship etc ,without jeopardizing the vivid presentation of recurrent themes like hunger, poverty, and exploitation of the downtrodden.

Arvind Adiga(born 23 October 1974) is an Indo-Australian writer and journalist. His debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won the 2008 Man Book Prize. Arvind Adiga's repertoire boasts of two novels namely *The White Tiger* (2008), *Last Man in Tower*(2011) and collections of short stories namely *Between the Assassinations*, *Smack*, *Last Christmas in Bandra*, *The Sultan's Battery* and *The Elephant*. His novels genuinely reflect not only the prevailing societal ills of the downtrodden India but also the contemporary concerns and aspirations of Indian society . He writes realistically and his characters are the persons whom he met. His great works represent to us the lives of India's poor in a practical and sympathetic manner.. His eyes miss nothing and some of his analogies are delightfully fresh. His short stories give the picture of the life of the extremely needy people like rickshaw pullers, scavengers, small poor children and also drug addicts.

The White Tiger is the Debut novel by Indian author Arvind Adiga. It is a furious and brutally effective counterblast to smug "India is shining" rhetoric. The novel provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy of Laxmangrh(Bihar). Ultimately, Balram succeeds in throwing off "caste albatross" and becomes a successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service. In a nation proudly shedding a history of poverty and underdevelopment, he represents, as he himself says, "tomorrow".

In narrating his complete journey from the small village called Laxmangarh, Bihar to the IT city Bangalore, Balram frequently discusses the issues of social mobility in the new social hierarchy of India. Having idolized Vijay from childhood, Balram recognizes the possibility of moving up in the world, but has to confront the reality of such movement throughout his story. One of the big issues is how India's social system has changed. Under the caste system, people's fates were predetermined, but they were happy, believing they belonged somewhere. However, the new social structure promises the possibility of social mobility, but actually only offers two social divisions: the rich and the poor. The poor are kept in an eternal state of subservience and servitude to the rich by the mechanism that Balram dubs "The Rooster Coop." However, they are now more unhappy because there is a possibility of social mobility that nevertheless remains out of their grasp. Balram ultimately finds a way to break from the Rooster Coop, but it requires him to compromise his ethics and personality - he has to kill his master and betray his family. He adopts a new name each time he moves up within India's social hierarchy—Munna, Balram, Ashok, *The White Tiger*—and describes with admiration his childhood hero ,Vijay, a pig farmer's son turned wealthy politician, for his versatile sense of self. That social mobility is a specter captured only through such difficult means is a comment on the unfortunate reality of a world built more on limitations than possibility.

Intertwined with the case of upward social mobility is the issue of prevalence of American concept of individualism .Balram is referred to as the "white tiger" in the novel. A white tiger symbolizes power in East Asian cultures, such as in Vietnam. It is also a symbol for freedom and individuality. Balram is seen as different from those he grew up with. He is the one who got out of the "Darkness" and found his way into the "Light". His perennial habit of eavesdropping combined with his innate individualism scripted his rags to riches story. His quest of freedom is very important in the text. With Ashok being killed, Balram discovers a new kind of freedom, one that transcends castes and social rules. He is not ashamed of killing Ashok:

All I wanted was the chance to be a man – and for that, one murder was enough.(318)

Another stark reality of “new India” phenomenon is the glimpses of globalisation writ large throughout the novel from beginning to the end. *The White Tiger* takes place in a time in which increased technology has led to world globalization, and India is no exception. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Specifically, Americanism has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. The India described by Balram is in the throes of a major transformation, heralded in part by the advent of globalization. India finds itself at the crossroads of developments in the fields of technology and outsourcing, as the nation adapts to address the needs of a global economy. Balram recognizes and hopes to ride this wave of the future with his White Tiger Technology Drivers business in Bangalore, but this force of globalization has a darker component for him as well. It threatens and disenfranchises those adhering to a traditional way of life, such as his family in Laxmangarh. Hence, he must change who he is in order to compete in this new world. Adiga thus vividly conjures the tension between the old and new India, suggesting that succeeding in this world (as Balram does) requires a flurry of ethical and personal compromises. For example in the novel, to satisfy Pinky’s fancy for American culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram simply move to Gurgaon instead of back to America. Globalization has assisted in the creation of an American atmosphere in India. Ashok justifies this move by explaining

Today it’s the modernest suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls—each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her.(101)

By blackmailing Ram Persad, the other driver, Balram is promoted and drives Ashok and Pinky to their new home. Ashok is even convinced India is surpassing the USA. There are so many more things I could do here than in New York now.. “The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years”. Balram is noticing the rapid growth as well. From the beginning of his story he knows that in order to rise above his caste he should become an entrepreneur. Although his taxi service is not an international business,

Balram plans to keep up with the pace of globalization and change his trade when need be. He asserts

I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today' (319)

Balram's recognition of the increasing competition resulting from globalization contributes to his corruption.

A fallout of this uncanny reality is the existence of "two Indias". India of "Light" and India of "Darkness". The result is that the simultaneous growth of burgeoning IT hubs like Bangalore, Hyderabad as well as "crazy city"-Delhi with urban slums and squalor as witnessed in the novel only posed new social threats. As experienced by Balram, a duality emerges-- one that eats and the other to be eaten, two types of people, prey and predators. Balram wants to be a predator, a man with a big belly, at any cost. In his greed for money and desperation for glamorous life he follows the path of crime. Emulating his master, he becomes an usurper by resorting to fraudulent means and misdemeanor, ignoring all refined ways of life. The viciousness of the so called modern rising and shinning India is in stark contrast to value based traditional India as Balram claimed, — The inevitable result is that due to disparity in income the rich grow richer and the poor turns poorer.

Further Throughout Balram's narrative, Adiga constantly exposes the prevalence of corruption throughout all of India's institutions. Schools, hospitals, police, elections, industries and every aspect of government are thoroughly corrupt, while practices such as bribery and fraud are entirely commonplace. Balram's approach to this truth largely involves a deeply cynical humor. However, there is an ugly component to his persona. In order to escape the "Darkness" and enter into the "Light," Balram must himself become a part of this system. His victory is thus bittersweet; while he has succeeded in elevating his social position, he continues to live in a country paralyzed by corruption, which prevents true progress from taking place. Adiga's ultimate point seems to be that corruption necessarily breeds corruption, unless of course a greater revolution remakes society. In the novel, Corrupt police, legal and administrative structure mark off another dark spot of shining India. Police masterminds the forced out confession to protect the rich men from the legal proceedings and get huge money in lieu of that. The hit and run case which legally belongs to Pinky is shifted to Balram:

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind the 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. (145)

Even judges ignore to see forced confession, because they "are in the racket too. They take their bribe, they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And life goes on". The close nexus between criminals, police and media persons is also exposed. Balram Halwai transformed

into Ashok Sharma—a Bangalore based successful entrepreneur is confident that he is “one of those who cannot be caught in India”.

In highlighting the corruption plaguing the streets of India and crippling the country, Arvind Adiga traces Balram Halwai’s experiences as he grows up learning about his country’s corruptness first hand. The Landlords who lived in his village stole most of every family’s money, leaving them to starve or send their young children to work to pay off their debt. In another instance ,Balram wasn’t learning much in school anyway because the education system was also tainted. The government refused to pay the teacher’s salary so the teacher stole government aid money that was supposed to go to the children and refused to teach anything until they paid him. The villagers weren’t even upset with the teacher because they looked at it as a justified rebellion against a corrupt system. Balram had to learn about the corrupt medical system when his father died. As long as the doctors paid the right people they could work private practice and avoid stepping foot in government hospitals. People who really needed medical attention, like Balram’s father, would most likely never get it, but the records would show that he did. All the while the police dipped their corrupt hands in everything. The judges can read between the lines, but they are also paid to look the other way, while innocent people get put away for crimes they didn’t commit. The entire voting system has been corrupted to ensure a certain party wins. The other ministers accept bribes from rich, influential families as long as the price tag is high enough. Adiga uses these different examples of corruption to show that the new India, the India that is supposed to be evolving and advancing, is actually filled with greed and self-serving, arrogant men chomping at the bit to get their hands dirty and climb up the social and political ladders.

Another socially menacing reality highlighted by the author is Indian Naxalism---an offshoot of corrupt and apathetic government at the helm. As a proof ,Balram in the novel describes the impoverished state of his village, which he notes is nothing like the idyllic image of village life that the government paints for outsiders. In truth, his entire village is dominated by four landlords, dubbed the Buffalo, the Stork (Thakur Ramdev), the Wild Boar, and the Raven. These men own the river, land and roads, residing in high-walled mansions on the outskirts of the village as they charge the peasants exorbitant fees for using their resources. Only such distressed financial conditions gave rise to birth of naxalite ideologues like “Great Socialist”.

The author’s merit also gets resounded in terms of the lively captivation of a man’s quest for personal freedom. Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste (often referred to as "the Darkness") and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and undoubtedly his personal inhibitions that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the text, Balram talks about how he was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. The novel is somewhat of a memoir of his journey to finding his freedom in India’s modern day capitalist society. Towards the beginning of the novel, Balram cites a poem from

the Muslim poet Iqbal where he talks about slaves and says "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world. Balram sees himself embodying the poem and being the one who sees the world and takes it as he rises through the ranks of society, and in doing so finding his freedom.

Apart from these new facets of india's Social Reality ,Arvind Adiga also rakes up the recurrent social evils of India's casteist setup, prostitution, poverty, slums & squalor etc.

Poverty, a hard hitting reality, underpins the entire social structure of the novel in terms of cause as well effects. Impoverished state of rural india esp its peasants and their alarming exploitation at the hands of usurious , wealthy landlords only further fuels their miseries. Like millions of ill-fated poors, Balram and his family,near and dear ones remained under the shadow of stifling poverty.And though It dampened Balram's aspirations earlier , it also provided a fertile ground for his own career advancement. For rather than a handicap, it became handy tool to anoint himself as "white Tiger" in true terms.

Prostitution is another dark area of India of Light. In the big cities, due to poverty, most of the women areforced to adopt this profession. In Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore, there are red light areas, where one can negotiate a price with these women. The prize depends on "High class or low class? Virgin or non-virgin?". In Delhi, rich people prefer "golden haired woman". Other than the Nepali girls and Ukranian student, the poor labourers from the village who are working in construction of mall also allow their woman for prostitution. Being a poor driver, Balram is cheated even by the prostitutes.When he pays for an attractive girl who is for the rich, he gets a girl who is moulded by hiding all her dark aspects.

The real face of Darkness with its social taboos, rigid castedistinctions and culture conflict is reflected in Balram's journey to seek the job as a driver.Wherever he goes, he was rejected due to his caste.Man is known and recognized by his caste. The old driver of Stork asks Balram:"What caste are you?". Similar question is asked by Stork: "Halwai..... What caste is that top or bottom?". Ram Persad, the servant or first driver of Stork hides his identity because, the prejudiced landlord didn't like Muslims –he claimed to be a Hindu just to get a job and feed his starving family. But when the truth is revealed, he was sacked from the job.

Thus to conclude, undoubtedly Adiga stands in the front line of Indian writing in English and is the perfectionist in the representation of his characters. India's socio-economic inequality is the major concern and his characters represent the patterns of Indian society.. He is the greatest realist whose realism distinguishes him from any wrong bias and has the ability to take a balanced view of man and society.The novel , The White Tiger, with its varied themes of metamorphed indian social scene of 21st century India does justice to the author's endeavour to portray an authentic picture of Indian society on his literary canvas...

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