

Across Time and Culture: Dickens and Adiga

Dharamraj EknathTembhare

Assistant Professor

Diu College, Diu

Abstract

My research paper **Across Time and Cultures: Dickens and Adiga** compares *David Copperfield* by the Victorian author Charles Dickens and *The White Tiger* by the contemporary author Aravind Adiga in terms of the protagonist's approach to life and his circumstance. David Copperfield and Balram Halwai are faced with similar situations in life – both of them lose a parent very young, both of them have to earn their living even as a child, both of them aspire to find themselves a better position in society. However, the way in which these characters deal with their situations and go about achieving their goals are very different. I try to find out the impact of the national culture and the historical period in the way David Copperfield and Balram Halwai make their way in life. I also wish to study the influence of the author's culture, value system and social situation in the way the characters live their lives. Another interesting aspect I would like to explore is the difference in the expectations and values of the audience Dickens and Adiga cater to. My argument is that individuals are as much products of their culture and time period as products of their immediate circumstances such as family situations and financial conditions, and the way in which authors mould their characters is highly dependent on the value system of the authors as well as the readers they aim at. The Sydney Morning Herald reviewer Andrew Riemer calls Adiga, 'The Dickens of Mumbai'. Writing for the Times of India, Aravind Adiga says that Dickens had no impact on the contemporary Indian authors. Dickens 'is shamelessly didactic and sentimental, a writer who shows us a divided society not to demand revolution but only a "change of heart" from rich and poor alike. No self-respecting Indian novelist has wanted to imitate him.' This again raises the question of time.

Key words : Culture, living, Impact, Value, Individual, Time.

Literature can be seen as a product of specific historical and cultural circumstances. As Lowrey Belen points out in the article "The Hero as a Reflection of Culture" 'historical events and social conditions of different cultures cause different attributes to become valued in leaders'. She says that a hero's actions and motivations reflect cultural values. *David Copperfield* is a novel set in Victorian England. The protagonist, David, has absorbed the values and morals of the society and formed ideas of what is admirable and what are desirable achievements that he should aim at in his life. Furthermore, the manner in which his conquests are made is always guided by the notions and values of the time. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* has a different protagonist going through much the same experiences as David. However, he is from a different land and living in a different time period. Hence, the value system he has absorbed, his aspirations and the way in which he attains his dreams are all quite different from those of David.

In Dickens's *David Copperfield*, the protagonist is born after the death of his father, and his mother is incapable of protecting her son. Similarly, Balram loses his mother in his childhood and his father is unable to protect him. While David's step-father, Mr. Murdstone takes him out of school and puts him to work, it's Balram's grandmother, Kusum who is eager to stop his education and make him earn by working at a tea stall. While both David and Balram seek to come up high in society, David is highly moralistic and tries to cultivate himself through books and interaction with people of culture and good manners, whereas Balram's aim is to stop being treated as an animal and become one of the big-bellied men at any cost.

The moral connection between mothers and children indicates Dickens and Adiga's belief that mothers have an all important role in shaping their children's characters and destinies but in response to cruelty of the world they make mistakes.

David writes in the first person, limiting his viewpoint to what he sees in his youth and his attitude at that time. 'Whether I shall turn out to the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else these pages must show'(p-1) David tells the story of his youth as a young boy living happily with his mother and nurse Peggotty. David reflects upon his youth fondly and remembers his naïve youth contentedly. David struggles to become a man in a cruel world, with little money and few people to guide him. Similar to Balram who explains his story to the Chinese Premier when he becomes a young entrepreneur with all the details of his childhood at his village and his upbringing as an entrepreneur as, "The autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian'. That's what I ought to call my life story."(p-10)

David's mother dies and David returns home; his stepfather Mr. Murdstone neglects him and send him to his wine bottling business, where David cleans wine bottles like Balram wipes tables at the tea stall in Dhanbad .In London David gets the help of Mr. Micawber, who mismanages his finances. Balram is also neglected by his family and goes to Delhi with Kishan, who helps him to become a driver.

David seeks his fortune with his aunt Betsey Trotwood and returns to her and pursues in his writing career with increasing commercial success, whereas Balram seeks his fortune by murdering his employer Mr. Ashok and becomes a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga is passive about treatment of love and romantic approach but Dickens depicted his characters intermingled by love with one another. Uriah Heep, an assistant, is fraudulent in his dealings with Mr. Wickfield, the same condition of assistants of political leaders in India is depicted by Adiga when Ashok goes to minister's bungalow and his assistant corrupts Ashok more.

'If Indian village is paradise, then the school is paradise within the paradise'(p-32) This is an ironical statement about village schools of India where Balram was disappointed. David was also dejected with the schoolteacher of Salem house. Students tease David when the Schoolteacher of Salem House hangs a board around the neck of David as a dog who bites his step-father. Similarly, Balram's schoolmates also tease him as 'coal breaker' when they see Balram leave the school and join the tea stall .

Dickens and Adiga both expose inhumanity of child labour. Their characters suffer punishments at the hands of forces larger than themselves. The arbitrary suffering of innocents makes for the most vividly affecting scenes of the novels. Dickens sympathize with the poor and indicates that their woes result from society's unfairness, not their own defect. Adiga also implies the same idea and gives justifications for Balram's act of murder. Dickens and Adiga do not paint a moral picture but shows that wealth and class are questionable indicators of character and morality. They convene us to judge their characters based on their individual deeds and qualities not on the hand that the cruel world deals them.

David rebels first when he bites Mr. Murdstone and gives response to his humiliation. It isn't long after that that he escapes from London and flee to the wealthy Miss Betsey which proves neither his self-reliance nor his own inner virtue. On the contrary, Balram manages himself to face the situation accepting humiliation and makes way to his success. He has transformed himself from Munna alias Balram into Ashok Sharma. In his novel *Crime and Punishment* Dostoevsky questioned who is the real criminal and argued that some men are above ordinary human beings and have the right to commit murder. Likewise sometimes Balram seems to be a wicked man but it was just a step to reach his goal when the upper class people closed every gate of growth to the downtrodden. He was not a sentimental person but a man of action so he uses his anger to make himself a happy and successful man.

Dickens suggests in his novel that marriages succeed to the extent that husband and wife attain equality in their relationship. He does not challenge his society's existing views of the roles of women but points to an age of empowered women. Adiga has tried to challenge the rules of society and the age old marriage system of India and depicted Pinky madam as bold and self-empowered.

'My father had left in a little room upstairs to which I had access (for it adjoined my own), a small collection of books which nobody else in our house ever troubled. From that blessed little room, Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphrey Clinker, Tom Jones, the Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, and Robinson Crusoe, came out, a glorious host, to keep me company. They kept alive my fancy and my hope of something beyond that place and time, -they, and the Arabian Nights, and the Tales of the Genii, -and did me no harm; for whatever harm was in some of them, was not there for me; I knew nothing of it...I have been Tom Jones (a child's Tom Jones, a harmless creature) for a week together. I have sustained my own idea of Roderick Random for a month at a stretch, I verily believe'. (p-53) Like David, Balram is inspired by poetry when a Muslim bookseller read the lines, 'You were looking for the key for years/but The door was always open'(p-253).

Dickens and Adiga give their characters different accents to indicate their social classes. Uriah Heep and Mr. Peggotty are two notable examples of such characters whose speech indicates their social class. Uriah in order to appear poor and good constantly drops the 'h' sound in 'humble' and Mr. Peggotty's lower class accent indicates genuine humility and poverty. Adiga gave Balram's language a difference when he pronounces 'mall' as 'maal' and 'pizza' as 'pijja' which indicates his schooling background and social class. Pinky madam and Mr. Ashok has their own superior tone while speaking.

Dickens critically observed the social condition of the early Victorian era and depicts it in this novel which is set against a backdrop of great social change. Industrial revolution transformed the landscapes and gave the chance to capitalists and manufacturers to hoard huge amounts of wealth and the gap between the rich and the poor remained wide. A large number of rural masses began to migrate the cities in search of job opportunities. As a result cities became overpopulated and poverty, disease, hazardous factory conditions and slum-dwelling became common. Adiga's description of the various aspects of Indian society gives us a microscopic picture of Indian life. He has given us a comprehensive view and profound insight about modern India. He has exposed ugly aspects of broken marriages, illicit relationships, alcoholism, call centre culture, politics and prostitution. The rikshaw puller, socialist, terrorist, schoolmaster, poor boy working at tea stall ,rich landlady, driver, journalist, businessman, and political leaders are some typical characters that are depicted by Adiga in Dickensian sharp manner. The focus is totally on the invisible lower class and developing lower middle class of Indian society.

Charles Dickens' industrialisation transformed into globalisation in Adiga's novels. The industrial revolution (1760-1851) was viewed as a means of development in the field of mass production and emerging merchant class, colonial powers, comfortable living as well as the growth of civilization. Dickens frequently delineates his own personal experiences in his novels. For instance, he transfers his father's qualities into Mr. Micawber and his own experiences of working in factories are made use of. As a result of industrialism in England, people left their villages and families and migrated to cities for better chances of job. Adiga shows in *The White Tiger* that Balram left his family and went to Delhi to become a driver and gradually after the murder of his employer he became the owner of the taxi company. Having experience of journalism Adiga has an eye to see how underprivileged live in the shadows of globalization and is able to become an entrepreneur. Balram's taxi company's motto is 'We Drive Technology Forward' in English with twenty six shining new Toyota Qualises, all fully air conditioned. They drive call centre boys and girls in style, just wherever they say. In the age of globalization city life corrupted Balram and he seeks to drink foreign brand whisky and golden haired girl to spend the night. He keeps no friends now because he feels friends are dangerous and avoids getting close with the drivers of his company. He doesn't slap or bully, or mock or insult them by calling them his family, but treat them as they are his employees and he is their boss. When the work is done he will kick them out of the office, no chitchat, no cups of coffee because he says, 'Once I was a driver to a master but now I am a master of drivers'(p-302).

The symbol of sea indicates an unknown and powerful force in the life of David Copperfield whereas the white tiger represents a violent, undefeatable force beyond human control.

'My meaning simply is that whatever I have tried to do in life, I have tried with all my heart to do well...I have always been thoroughly in earnest'. David justifies his deeds towards the end of the novel in chapter XLII. Dickens uses this narrative to emphasize the importance of moral ordering, to suggest that we like David. In *The White Tiger* Balram justifies his act of murder as "Let animals live like animals;let humans live like humans'. That's my whole philosophy in a sentence"(p-276) and 'All I wanted was the chance to be a man – and for that, one murder was enough'.(p-318).

Dickens has beautifully woven the words he chose to tell the life story of David Copperfield. He gives extensive descriptions of the characters with lavish details of landscapes. His realistic characters, sardonic humour and constantly working double time shows Dickens' ability to provide multiple dimensions to his novels.

Dickens' comments on the social situation of England changed the situation and attitude of England to a better society. Likewise, Adiga's narratives will bring expected change in India. Adiga criticises educated professionals, upper class and also working class for their passive attitude towards the present situation. He not only blames the chaotic state of affairs but also tries to find out a solution.

Dickens mostly wrote his novels in installments and ended each section with suspense to hook his readers for next update. Eventually, the novel progresses with various characters and number of multiple plots resolving the intrigues and conspiracies. He gradually develops his novel with the focus on plot and creates interest in characters and setting so that readers want it to continue even though in the extended period of time. Adiga has used a similar technique in the epistolary manner in seven nights. Dickens pen-pictured his characters with minute details and imagery to make easy to remember each quality and physical appearance. For instance Uriah Heep's red hair indicate his fickle personality while Dora's silly dog, Jip, shows a feverish mannerism. In *The White Tiger* Adiga attempts to give the facts of physical appearance of Balram's father as 'knotted rope' and the story of poor man's life is written on his body in a sharp pen.

Dickens has portrayed the city of London with its factories, pollution and varied societies with picturesque effect. Likewise, Adiga presents the series of events in his novel such as the funeral of his mother with the chanting 'Shivas name is the truth' and the pollution of a holy river Ganga into which everything died, and composed, and decomposed and was reborn from, and died into again in a very picturesque manner. Balram's village Laxmangarh with its defunct electricity poles, water buffaloes, pornographic film boards of blue movie theatres and tea shops and a lot more portraits of Indian villages, traffic, fashion and the shopping malls in cities are painted in a realistic manner in the novel.

We find each character and author motivated and inspired by their own cultures and the historical time period in which they live. The values and morals a person acquires from his/her society exerts a great influence in the choices he/she makes in his/her life. It is evident that to a large extent the wider environment rather than an individual could be held responsible for the person he/she turns out to be.

Bibliography

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. Noida: HarperCollins, 2008.

Cutie, S Annie, et al. "Charles Dickens' Industrialisation and Aravind Adiga's Globalisation – A Study". *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*.

Dickens, Charles. *David Copperfield*. Project Gutenberg. 24 Nov 2009. Web.

Lowrey, Belen. *The Hero as a Reflection of Culture*. Sabiduria, vol.1,1.