

## **The White Tiger - Book Review**

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Arvind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger* won the 2008 Booker Prize. He is the fourth Indian –born author to win the prize. His other works are *Between the Assassinations*, *Last Man in Tower* and *Selection Day*. He has also written short stories such as 'The Sultan's Battery', 'Smack', 'Last Christmas in Bandra' and 'The Elephant'. Adiga began his journalistic career as a financial journalist, interning at the Financial Times.

He was subsequently hired by TIME, where he remained a South Asia correspondent for three years before going freelance. During this freelance period, he wrote *The White Tiger*. Arvind Adiga now lives in Mumbai, Maharashtra India.

*The White Tiger* is the debut novel that was first published in 2008 and won the 40<sup>th</sup> Man Booker Prize in the same year. It has sparked outrage among many in India, but it is an entertaining tale of a man whose soul has had to move from servitude to Independence and despite the horrendous crime that he has committed, finds his freedom to live life on his own terms.

According to Adiga, *The white Tiger* attempts to capture the unspoken voice of people from the darkness – the impoverished areas of rural India.

The entire novel is narrated through seven letters by Balram Halwai, an exceedingly charming, egotistical admitted murderer, to the Premier of China, who will soon be visiting India. Adiga simply uses India and the corruption and poverty within it as a backdrop to comment on vast complex aspects of human nature and psychology.

Balram is an Indian man from an impoverished background, born into the 'darkness' of rural India. His family is from the Halwai caste, a caste that indicates sweet makers. His village is dominated and oppressed by four landlords.

Balram gets a break when he goes to work for one of the landlords, and then ends up moving to Delhi via a job as a driver to Mr. Ashok, the landlord's son. From behind the wheel of their Honda city Car, Balram's new world is a revelation; crime, corruption, greed, adultery, prostitution and alcohol abuse.

The Marxist mentality is challenged by Adiga. The Marxist theory class conflict within capitalism arises due to intensifying contradictions between the rich and the poor. The novel widely criticizes traditional institutions in India, offers a cynical view of religion, and calls for proletariat revolution in line with Marxist values.

The Author seems to question the readers. Would the reader support someone like Balram. He makes his way from the darkness to the light. Balram has no regret or guilt or remorse of any kind and this makes him an amoral individual who focuses only on himself. Each of his decisions and actions shape him into an anti-hero that forces us to judge him in every way we can.

Quite early in his confession letter to the Chinese Premier, Mr. Jiabao who is about to visit India talks about the murder of his Boss, Mr. Ashok, a crime that enabled him to move to Bangalore and set himself as a successful Entrepreneur. It is through his flashback journey that he describes how he has ended up committing such a huge crime. In the process we watch a sardonic serio-comic saga of the plight of India's poor.

The journey of Balram from rags to riches is not a pleasant one and he is constantly on an unrelenting social critique of the conditions that surround him. Balram's story becomes a story of 'half-baked Indians' and he says

The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half baked fellow is produced. He talks about how many Indians are half-baked just like him.

Through Balram's sarcastic comments in his letter we get to glimpse into the status of Indian villages. He says

*Your Excellency, I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarh is your typical Indian Village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and working telephones; and that the children of my village, raised on a nutritious diet of meat, eggs, vegetables and lentils, will be found, when examined with tape measure and scales, to match up to the minimum height and weight standards set by the United Nations and other organisations whose treaties our Prime minister has signed and whose forums he so regularly and pompously attends. HA!*

*Electricity Poles – defunct.*

*Water tap – broken.*

*Children – too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the Government of India.*

*( Adiga P.19)*

But it is time and again that we see Balram Halwai trying to remind us that he has grown up in the darkness- the immense swath of rural India where the poor vastly outnumber the rich and where the rights of the rich to oppress the poor is rarely questioned.

*India according to Balram is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of Darkness. (Adiga Pg.14)*

The biggest difference between these two India's is that of choice. In India of light one atleast has the choice to choose for himself, but in dark India one even cannot choose for himself. One cannot decide what one wants to do with one's life. The poor are not given the chance and they do not dare to snatch the chance from their exploiters.

Many move to the cities from their dark worlds with a hope that they can get a better life. Their expectations are never met and they move through life as failures as they are never given any opportunities to make it big in the city.

You can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal like way they live under the huge bridges and over passes, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them. (Adiga P.119)

We are reminded of George Orwell's Animal Farm when Balram refers to the filthy rich landlords in his community as the 'The Buffalo', 'The Stork', 'The Wild Boar' and 'The Raven'.

Corruption runs through the novel through the portrayal of the various characters who appear in it. Balram's role model is Vijay the bus conductor- a man hailing from a family of pig herds, but after having befriended a politician his lifestyle changes. From a bus conductor to a politician at the end of the Novel Vijay is one more character who has managed to make it out of the darkness.

Then we see the school teacher who has to stoop to the level of stealing the lunch money and uniforms of school children and says that he hasn't been paid his wages for a long time. He wants to stick on to his government job even though he knows that it doesn't yield anything.

Balram says

*No one blamed the school teacher for doing this. You can't expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet. Everyone in the village knew that he would have done the same in his position. Some were even proud of him, for having got away with it so cleanly. ( Adiga P.33)*

Adiga throws light on the caste system that prevails in India and how even to this day and time people give it a lot of importance. But Balram seems to appreciate and uphold the existence of a caste system. He compares India to a zoo where everyone was happy in his place.

*Goldsmiths here. Cowherds here. Landlords there. The man called a Halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows. The untouchable cleaned faeces. Landlords were kind to their serfs. Women covered their head with a veil and turned their eyes to the ground when talking to strange men.*

*( Adiga P.63)*

He blames the coming of Independence for the destruction of the caste system. Balram argues that this changed the order of people and lifestyles in India. He expresses a sense of nostalgia for life under the caste system, praising the sense of orderliness that pervaded the nation when one's fate was determined at birth by the position of one's family. In his mind , people were stuck where they were, but there was a general sense of satisfaction.

*And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on the fifteenth of August, 1947 – the day the British left – the cages had been left 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. ( Adiga P.64)*

Balram's meditation on the caste system makes a powerful point about the state of social mobility in post caste India, which seems to have preserved the worst elements of the caste system while dispensing with the emotional safety it provided. Naturally there are plenty of ways to argue that the caste system carried its own systemic flaws, but Balram does not focus on those.

Instead, he sees the current age as one which promises social mobility but which cannot provide it for the underclass, causing an anger which he exploits in himself and foresees as the eventual birth of a new revolution.

Democracy seems to be a big joke to Balram. He believes that he got a birthday date to remember because of Democracy. The Great Socialist is the boss of the darkness and the irony is that his party's symbol, a pair of hands breaking through handcuffs-symbolizing the poor shaking off the rich.

The three main diseases of our country according to Balram are typhoid, cholera and election fever. Any man who fights against the system loses his life and therefore there are no rebels.

It is undying ambition, determination and intelligence that he becomes driver no.2 at first and by blackmailing driver no. 1 takes on an indispensable role in his Master's household. You see an ambitious Balram slowly moving on to a higher position in his master's house.

Balram is very happy when the Mongoose keeps referring to him as family not realising that he is being used to cover up the accidental death of a little girl by Pinky madam. He says that this is what happens to drivers in Delhi everyday.

*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. ( Adiga P.169)*

There is a great deal of sadness in this book, especially where Balram talks about the treatment of the underclass who build the city, and are trapped there, hidden from plain view, employed in poor conditions and at low grade jobs, and in some cases held in slavery conditions. Balram refers to this as the "rooster coop".

*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. ( Adiga P.173)*

*The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy.*

*( Adiga p.175)*

This is the statement that Balram uses to explain the loyalty of servants in India. The theory of the Rooster Coop is the reason for their untiring faithfulness to their masters. And he even gives valid reasons and his chicken coop theory behind the reason why the poor don't dare to rise in front of their masters.

People are divided according to the liquor they drink. There are English liquor men and Indian liquor men. There are categories in the work the servants do to. There is Driver No.1 and Driver no.2 and you notice how their duties and their privileges also differ from one another.

*What I mean is that anytime I was not driving the car, I had to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, clean cobwebs with a long broom, or chase a cow out of the compound. There was one thing I was not allowed to do, and this was to touch the Honda City: Ram Prasad alone had the right to drive it and clean it. ( Adiga P.68)*

*The Servants pleasures that they enjoy shows the level of frustration that exists in the minds of the servants.*

*Slapping the master when he's asleep. Like jumping on pillows when masters are not around. Or urinating into their plants. Or beating or kicking their pet dogs. Innocent Servants' pleasures. ( Adiga P. 184)*

*We also see how the poor are also dependent on the poor and money is all that they need and want. We see this when Balram talks about the men of his house arriving home once in a while from the cities only to be attacked by their wives and how his father too suffered all his life for others and died a miserable death.*

*There was fighting and wailing and shrieking. My uncles would resist, but my father got peeled and skinned every time. ' I survived the city, but I couldn't survive the women in my home,' he would say, sunk into a corner of the room.*

*( Adiga P.26)*

*An example of this is Kusum, the grandmother of Balram who throughout the novel only has expectations from Balram. Her letters that she keeps sending to Balram are always about money. All relationships start and end with money.*

*We are all so proud of you being in the city. But you must stop thinking only about yourself and think about us too. (Adiga P.190)*

*And Balram like so many others in the country plays the blame game. He accuses the people around him for the corruption that is slowly corroding him. He blames the system, he blames the corrupt politicians, his corrupt teacher in school, the corrupt landlords and finally blames Mr. Ashok his owner for the changes that happen in him.*

*The rest of today's narrative will deal mainly with the sorrowful tale of how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness.*

*All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him- and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent? ( Adiga P.197)*

*The death of Mr. Ashok at the hands of Balram is also justified by Balram. Though there is a conflict in his mind he consoles himself by saying that anyway he was killing a man who was already corrupt.*

*Mr. Ashok made you take the blame when his wife killed that child on the road.*

*This is a pittance. You live in a city. What do you save? Nothing.*

*The very fact that Mr. Ashok threatens your family makes your blood boil.*

*( Adiga P.246)*

There is no remorse, or regret or guilt in Balram's mind till the end of the novel. The money that he has got, the business that he has established and the lifestyle that he is leading is enough to keep him going. As he says at the end of the novel

*Yet even if all my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor – even if they throw me in jail and have all the other prisoners dip their beaks into me – even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose – I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat.( Adiga P.320)*

Adiga does not judge Balram's acts neither does he talk about the moral dilemma that does or does not take place in Balram's heart. All we see is a glimpse of the Darkness that prevails in the lives of many poor Indians and a 'White Tiger' who manages to break out of the Rooster Coop.