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THE WHITE TIGER: READING AS A SOCIAL SATIRE AND CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

The role of a satirist has to entertain and instruct his readers through his work. Instruction is a signifier of criticism which aims at restoring order and deterring wrongs in the society. Aravind Adiga, a contemporary Indian artist is the satirist of the same inclination. His novels are overtly political preoccupied with burning issues of capitalisation, class disparity, identity crisis, corruption and deterioration of moral values to name a few. He jolts the readers out of their passivity to make them understand and try curbing the prevalent ills in society.

The present paper is an attempt to study Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) as a social satire—a satire on India's class hierarchy, economy, politics, education system, judiciary in all their nastiness. By sarcastically touching the prevalent injustices and evil practices, he brings forth the dark side of progressing India. The focus of the paper is on how the novelist uses satire to mock societal ills with the main purpose of ameliorating them.

Keywords: *The White Tiger*, Satire, Marginalisation, Capitalisation, Class Disparity, Ills

The literary satirist apart from playing the role of an entertainer uses his artistic creation to impregnate people's consciousness with introspection. His mode of assessing an existing sociopolitical system in a society is satire—a form of writing which makes fun of the evils, wrongs, errors, institutions or society in general. It becomes a moral obligation of a literary artist to rectify oddities and ills rampant in any society by using art as an instrument of change.

Having similar thematic preoccupation, Aravind Adiga, a contemporary Indian novelist born on 23 October 1974 in Madras is highly committed to reform society through his works of social significance. His novel *The White Tiger* takes the satiric themes to highlight the socio-political reality in contemporary Indian society. A debut novel by Aravind Adiga came to world-wide recognition for winning the 2008 'Man Booker Prize.' Higgins believes that the novel has been universally lauded for its attention to "important social issues: the division between the rich and the poor, and issues on a global scale." (2008, Web 2019). In an interview, Adiga claims that his work was the result of his firsthand experience with the underprivileged sections of society who he met during his travels as a journalist. He strongly admits:

I wanted to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies.

That's what I'm trying to do— it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination. (Jeffries 2008, Web 2019)

The White Tiger is undoubtedly a novel that engages the social reality of India and has therefore evoked cosmopolitan fame. As Moseley puts, the novel experiments a new genre variant, a “condition-of-India novel” (154). It is an epistolary novel written as a series of letters in seven parts by the protagonist Balram Halwai, a sweet maker from the underclass to Wen Jibao, the supposed premier of China about to visit India. He intends to share the story of the underdogs in the city of Bangalore largely portraying India in the novel. As a postcolonial text, the novel critiques the imperial centre marginalizing people based on their class, economy, culture or environment. They are denied rights, privileges and opportunities that are given to upper class people and are further disempowered in social, economic and political spheres of life.

The class disparity prevalent in India is voiced by the novelist through his mouthpiece Balram, who declares: “In the old days there were one thousand castes and dynasties in India. These days there are only two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies. And only two dynasty: eat or get eaten up” (64). This hints at the socio-economic inequality that creates a great divide between the rich and the poor in the society to which Balram Halwai belongs. This disparity, as is rightly suggested by Aseefa Meheretu “results from disadvantages which people and communities experience in a socially constructed system of inequitable relations within a hegemonic order that allows one set of individuals to exercise undue power and control over another set with the latter manifesting one or a number of vulnerabilities and markers based on class, gender and other similar characteristics (91). This marginality is “a deliberate social construction by the dominant class to achieve desirable outcomes of political control, social exclusion and economic exploitation” (Meheretu et.al 92). This is indeed an apt comment of the feudalistic structure of the society that is portrayed by Adiga in the novel.

Such discrimination has led downtrodden to define and redefine their identities, causing their psychological degradation and leading them into a vicious cycle of mental suffering, corrupt practices and criminal offences. Therefore, today, the process of coming to define oneself in a globalised Indian society has become tough often ending up in an identity crisis. This happens with the protagonist of the novel who keeps defining and redefining himself as different persons to finally assert his identity as a successful entrepreneur by evil and criminal means.

Born to a rickshaw-puller in a small village of Laxmangarh, Balram calls it “the Darkness” because this village lacks the basic amenities provided by the government like electricity and telecommunication, safe drinking water and nutritious food. The parts of India in utter penury are referred to as the ‘Darkness,’ a world of slavery, poverty, exploitation and illiteracy. Like many other poor people, Balram could not complete his school education as it was a luxury meant to be enjoyed by the rich people. Adiga ridicules the educational back up of children belonging to the poor sections of society through Balram:

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half hour before falling asleep—all these ideas, half formed and half-digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (10)

It is no denying the fact that free education is provided by the government, but it is not reaching all. The funds allotted for education many a time do not reach where they belong. Many children have to drop out to earn their livelihood. The children give up their dreams of education and long for a rich life. Sometimes their lives end up without their dreams being realized.

Similarly Balram who was an intelligent boy and called a 'white tiger'—the rarest of the species among common ones, gives up his studies to work as a cleaner in a tea shop like many others who work in such shops and stalls to earn bread for their families.. He had to pay off the loan taken to get his sister married. Later he was hired as a chauffeur by Stork, a village landlord, for his foreign returned son Ashok. The condition of such children as him is really pitiable as he observes, "Men, I say, but better to call them human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still 'boys'" (51).

Adiga exposes the loopholes of the Indian education system, which he believes resembles a jungle, another jungle, probably a smaller analogy to the nation. Indian education system, he says is in the 'Darkness' and made up of schools where a teacher's moral priority is not to teach, but earn money through dishonest means. Balram's teacher, a betel nut chewer spits in the classroom, boozes, dozes off and sells the uniforms and food of the students in the market but he claims: "The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money- he said he hadn't been paid his salary in six months" (33).

Balram sarcastically remarks, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness" (14). Here he describes the wide gulf between his landlord's home and his own—the landlords lived in high-walled mansions that were self-sufficient in it, having their own wells, ponds and temple. They only came out, as Balram puts it sarcastically—"to feed," not the poor but their ego (25). And the poor live in the filth with "families of pigs . . . sniffing through the sewage" on the middle of the main road, the entrance of the house marked with the tethered buffalo, men and women sleeping in separate rooms having " their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede" (21). In Delhi, "the capital of ... glorious nation" (118) the situation is similar. Mr. Ashok, Balram's boss lives in a high-rise apartment called the Buckingham Towers, shiny and new, big lobby, lift and all plush white furnishings in the rooms while the slums nearby which was filled with construction workers who had made these high-rise apartments lived in shanties made of tin and who defecated in the open. The grim reality of the poor man's Delhi is described thus:

All the roads look the same, all of them go around and around grassy circles in which men are sleeping or eating or playing cards, and then four roads shoot off from that grassy circle, and then you go down one road, and you hit another grassy circle where men are sleeping or playing cards...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. (119-20)

For Balram, moving to Delhi is not just a shift to an aristocratic society, but a displacement from his cultural roots He is forced do metamorphose himself and this journey sets off from innocence to experience—from an intelligent hardworking person to a criminal conspirator. He transforms "from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness" (197). Though his boss was good, but his family always insulted him owing to his belonging to a servant class. He starts to hate them all. When his boss's wife Pinky kills a child during a drunken driving, he is forced by them to sign a legal document confessing that he had run over the child. This infuriates him against the class of owners or masters as a whole. He shows his resentment against the so called aristocratic class and the judiciary in hands in glove with them to hide their crimes:

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....we all live in the world's greatest democracy...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. (169)

The poor are treated like caged animals, bonded labourers and slaves. Adiga compares the situation of poor, underprivileged and servants class with the rooster coop:

Go to Old Delhi, behind 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. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of a dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from the above. 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 the human beings in this country. (173-74)

At the heart of this Rooster Coop lies the honest servitude and unconditional commitment for the family. Balram explains that no Indian ever cheats on or rebels his master not because he is honest:

No. it's because 99.9 per cent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop ... Masters trust their servants with diamonds in this country! Why doesn't the servant take the suitcase full of diamonds? He's no Gandhi, he's human, he's you and me. But he is in the Rooster Coop. The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. . . Never before in human history have so few owned so much to so many... A handful of men have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude: a servitude so strong that you can put the key of emancipation in a man's hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (175-76)

Adiga attacks this monster of capitalism devouring poor people like Balram. Believing the 'survival of the fittest' theory, he accepts the blame of killing of a child actually run over and killed by Pinky, his master's wife when she was drunk and driving. The novelist through the character of Balram urges the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, to pay attention to the stark reality of the present democracy of India before visiting India. He declares that booming economy, complete literacy, transparency and integrity, and reduction in people Below Poverty Line are simply misleading. As Ghosh points out that "the period since the neo-liberal economic reforms were introduced in India has been one of dramatically increased income inequality. This will come as no surprise to most people...to see the enormous increase in conspicuous consumption by the rich and even the urban upper middle income groups, and also to see side by side how the lives of the poor have become even more vulnerable and precarious" (2004. Web 2014).

The capitalist society which privileges the individual's self-interest is one of the main causes of socio-economic disparities. Balram, the 'white tiger' wants to set himself free from this rooster coop because he does not want to be oppressed anymore. He loots seven hundred thousand rupees from his boss and murders him. For him this amount "was enough for a house. A motorbike. And a small shop. A new life" (280). He manages to escape and runs away to Bangalore along with his nephew, the only surviving family member. There he starts living in the guise of his master leaving behind all the miseries of his previous status as a servant. Balram has finally broken out of the coop. The 'White Tiger' triumphs in the end.

Another factor of economic disparity in India is unemployment. The villagers' migratory brain drain to the cities in search of jobs is primarily driven by their urge to improve their economic status which is denied to them in technocratic and urbanized India. Balram tells that all the buses were filled to the overflowing and people went to Gaya from where they further travelled to Delhi, Kolkata or Dhanbad (26). Such a life of economic deprivation is the lot of the majority in India. Balram sums up the class divide: "the history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand year war of brains between the rich and the poor. Each side is eternally trying to hoodwink the other side; and it has been this way since the start of time" (27).

Adiga scans the way business community functions through hegemonic classes who see people as commodities that can be victimised in the name of business success, job creation, and social mobility. *The White Tiger* is a critique of business that retards social mobility and social justice, and its identification of people who become direct victims of acts of trade. In recent times, businessmen are worshipped not only as important instruments of economic systems, but as champions of social transformation. Balram is a businessman who can stain his hands with the blood of an easy victim. He is like any other businessman who wins the race of competition by keeping others behind. Businessmen like Balram do not create a new class, but rather they reaffirm the status quo. From the class of oppressed, he transforms himself into the class of oppressors and take to evil means of climbing the ladder of success. Through the consciousness of Balram, the novel shows how business community disguises the inherent injustice in the system that is based on relegating certain classes to the status of marginalities, to substandard conditions so that other classes can thrive. It brings the people victimized by business community to the fore.

Balram becoming aware of how the whole system of corruption works starts exploiting all the loopholes of the society to become a successful businessman. At the end of the story, he rechristens himself as an upper caste Ashok to become a member of the aristocratic class. Unable to change the century old class hierarchal tradition and endemic corruption, applying cunning business policies, doing malpractices, and adopting an upper caste name are not only the deeds of “Balram but it can be the story of many underclass boys” (Bartwal 24).

The White Tiger is a strong indictment of the political system and electoral process in contemporary Indian society. In a serious sarcastic tone, Balram notes that though India did not have sewage, drinking water or Olympic Gold medals, it had democracy. He recalls despite being a minor his name was included in the voter's list. He remembers, “I had to be eighteen. All of us in the tea shop had to be eighteen, the legal age to vote. There was an election coming up and the tea shop owner had already sold us. He had sold our fingerprints – the inky fingerprints which the illiterate person makes on the ballot paper to indicate his vote.” (97).

Like the education system of India, Adiga also views the elections in the ‘Darkness’ as a malaise inflicted upon the nation. Indeed, it were the elections that actually gave Balram his birth date, because his employer had sold off his vote to the great socialist and he was supposed to turn eighteen immaturely, to be able practice adult franchise. The main difference between ‘Light’ and ‘Darkness’ is that in ‘Light’, people are free, cast their own vote and in ‘Darkness’ people are again free to cast their own vote, but not by themselves as Balram declares: “I am India’s most faithful voter and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth” (102).

The tainted status and criminal antecedents of the political leaders, their tall and fake promises to the public and wiping off of those who oppose is the characteristic signifier of the Indian democracy as depicted by Adiga in the novel. The futile exercise of holding election in a politically depraved country like India is brought to the fore when the protagonist comments: “There are three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera and election fever . . . This last one is the worst. It makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in” (98). Balram caustically remarks: “Like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh.” (98). He tells that his father too had seen twelve elections but someone else had voted for him every time. For Adiga, Indian leaders subordinate the common man’s welfare to their selfish; avaricious and hedonistic tendencies.

Adiga’s story of the underdogs of which Balram is an embodiment is rather realistic fable of the disease that infects the underclass. On the question of the morality of his act, Balram argues that in Bangalore one has the option to be good but “In Laxmangarh, he doesn’t even has this choice. This is the difference between that India and this India: the choice” (306). Besides, one cannot expect a revolution to happen. Once again Balram states: “An Indian revolution? No, sir. It won’t happen. People of this country are still waiting for their war of freedom to come from somewhere else. . . . That will never happen. Everyman must make his own Benares” (304). He justifies his action with words that reflect the restlessness and the boredom of the underclass that provokes their resentment and rebellion: “Have I not succeeded in the struggle that every poor man should be making- the struggle not to take the lashes that your father took, not to end up in a mound of indistinguishable bodies that will rot up in the black mud of the Mother Ganga (318).

To conclude Adiga has been faithful to the literary satirist's art in reflecting the social injustices, vices and inequities in contemporary Indian society. His novel vehemently critiques the credibility of law makers, policy makers, bureaucrats, political leaders and aristocrats in our society. The prevailing immorality, hypocrisy and corrupt tendencies of highly placed persons are aspects of the national psyche which he subjects to criticism.

The White Tiger wrapped in an acerbic portrayal of social, economic and political satire is an allegory of contemporary India. The novelist questions the socio-economic inequality in our society and further probes into such instruments of imbalance that shapes the lives of the ordinary people to an endless life of misery, displacement, disillusionment and identity crisis. Through the novel, Adiga gives the voice to the socio-politically, economically and culturally marginalized sections of society. He gives a message to those at the hegemonic centre to give these people their rights and dues to prevent their becoming criminals. They will then contribute positively to the uplift of their community and entire humanity: "It may be turn out to be decent city. Where human can live as like human. And animal can live like animals" (318). He makes a strong plea to the government to improve the standard of living of the so far left out impoverished sections of society so that their dreams and aspirations are fulfilled. By writing this satiric novel he intends to restore fairness, equity and tolerance in the society which is so much engulfed in a cesspool of socio-political, cultural and economic problems.

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