

Exploring Socio-Environmental Dimensions in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

The present research paper is an attempt to analyze Balram's journey from the darkness to the light in Arvind Adiga's Booker prize winning novel The White Tiger. Adiga in his debut award winning novel has exposed the intricacies of the society by unveiling the social evils like discrimination, marginalization, political corruptions, injustice, bribery, and prostitution. It is a story of a poor man's quest to be freed from the tentacles of social evils in modern India. Balram's quest which transforms him from a poor man to a successful business entrepreneur reveal some of his hidden desires, inferiority complexes, criminal tendencies and social non-conforming behaviors. The paper aims to explore and highlight the varied socio-environmental dimensions under the purview of social structure theory and one of its sub-theories named, strain theory. The paper also examines how the socio-environmental dimensions affect the mental psyche of an individual being from marginal class of the society.

Keywords: *The White Tiger*, discrimination, marginalization, criminal, social structure theory

Arvind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, won the 40th Man Booker Prize in the year 2008, is a compelling novel about a protagonist named Balram Halwai. The story of the novel is written in epistolary form in seven un-posted letters, from the protagonist to The Chinese Premier, Mr. Wen Jiabao before his impending visit to Bangalore. Balram has written these letters to describe his life journey from a village poor boy to a successful business entrepreneur in the city of Bangalore. During the course of the story, the author reveals many pitfalls of our Indian society and poses a bold challenge to the readers to uproot the causes of existing social evils. Eradication of the social evils is necessary to strengthen our present social-economic status and impart morale values. Adiga "as a communist manifesto" (Singh 111) writes for the poor who belongs to the underclass strata of the society. Choudhury (2014) in her paper titled "Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a Re-inscription of Modern India" has compared Adiga with three great Indian novelists, R.K.Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao, who writes for moral and spiritual upheaval of

the Indians during British rule. She has aptly mentioned that “Arvind Adiga is one of the very few modern Indian novelists who took the present day challenges against the economic exploitation and political deprivation, the social marginalization and the spiritual subjugation of the poor”(150).

In this era of globalization, Adiga tries to expose the existing social evils like caste discrimination, political corruptions, landlordism, prostitution and bribery in modern India. In his novel, *The White Tiger*, he boldly represents the fact that though we are in the age of globalization, modernization and on the verge of IT revolution, we have two separate countries exists in India: “an India of Light, and an India of Darkness” (*The White Tiger* 14). A person who belongs to the ‘Dark’ India tries to overcome the darkness and it is his struggle to come into ‘Light’. Ironically, after coming to ‘Light’ they still remain in the ‘Dark’. Cities like Delhi, Bangalore and Mumbai are full of these kinds of people who have come from the interior villages of modern India where even their basic needs and facilities are not fulfilled. Though these metropolitan cities gives a picaresque of modern India from the surface level, but from the deeper level it gives a picture of real India that is the dichotomized society which harbors both- the rich and the poor. To make this distinction vivid, he explains,

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 while the cars roar past them. (119-20)

The marginalized class or the subaltern of the present day India constitutes a larger section of the society and Adiga’s narrative of the whole situation unveil and represent their struggles and sufferings against the rich class. They are not only suppressed by the rich, but also humiliated, exploited and subjugated by the rich class. Balram’s master in Delhi, Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam humiliated him several times for mispronouncing the word ‘pizza’ as ‘pijja’. Once, on the occasion of Pinky Madam’s birthday, Balram was asked to dressed up like a Maharaja and served them food as per the orders given by his master. By seeing Balram, Pinky Madam burst-out in laughter and knowingly made him to pronounce the word ‘Pizza’ for her amusement. Moreover, he was also being humiliated by Mongoose (Mukesh), Mr. Ashok’s elder brother, for not finding a one rupee coin which he has lost inside the car after when they were returning from bribing a person around half a million rupees. He has made Balram to get down on his knees like a dog to look for a one rupee coin on the floor of their Honda City car:

As he was getting out of the car, the Mongoose tapped his pockets, looked confused for a moment and said, ‘I have lost a rupee.’

He snapped his fingers at me.

‘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. (139)

Through this incident, Adiga delineates that the rich class is happy to bribe millions of ruppies for their own benefit but can't give a one rupee coin to a poor person. They have always treated the poor like a caged animal. Ironically, the pets of the rich are treated with much affection and much love than the poor. Mr. Ashok's two Pomeranian dogs were treated with much respect than Balram. He was not allowed to sit alone inside the car with the music and the air-conditioner on. Balram's story surfaced many social evils which are still in existence in our modern society. Balram's voice in the novel represents the voice of the marginalized section of the society and it is their struggle to become freed from, what Adiga has metaphorically presents, the 'Rooster Coop'. He uses the term 'Rooster Coop' as a metaphor to describe the present condition of the marginalized section. They are not only trapped like animals inside the coop, but ironically, have accepted their condition as their inevitable fate. They don't even protest or raise their voice to come out of the 'Rooster Coop'. Some who tries to come out of the coop like Balram are either being forced to commit crime or adopt non-conforming behavior to break the shackles of poverty and be free.

Balram Halwani alias Munna, the son of the Rickshaw puller was born in the village of Laxmangarh. He was never allowed to complete his schooling and he like "thousands of others in this country.... is half-baked" (10). The author metaphorically has used the term 'half-baked' to expose the picture of those poor people who were never allowed to complete their schooling because of the financial constraints being posed on their families. The administrative heads of the village school was corrupt and the person-in-charge has stolen money from the school fund and has sold the school uniforms in the neighboring village. The picturesque of Laxmangarh typifies with an example of the typical Indian paradise where corruption breeds. Describing the vivid imagery of the village infrastructure, Adiga holds up a lamentable and a deplorable picture of the village Laxmangarh. The electric poles are not functional, water taps are broken, and children of the village are suffering from malnutrition. There are no hospitals and no medical facilities available in the village. But ironically, three different foundation stones are been laid by three different politicians before three different elections. To make things even more worse there are no proper drinking water facilities available. The river which flows through the village is highly contaminated and the water is not fit for drinking. Under these circumstances, poor people like Balram's father are dying. There is no one to take care of the poor. The politicians and the landlords are busy in making money. The village is been divided into four major classes- the buffalo (landlords), the stork (owner of the river), the wild Boar (agricultural land owner) and the Raven (owner of dry land). They are the privileged class of the village who "lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh- the landlords' quarters. They had their own temples inside the mansions, and their own wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village

except to feed” (25). The only relation that exists between this upper class of the society and the poor is of suppression and subjugation. The villagers are left with only two choices - “eat or get eaten up” (64). The upper strata of the society have been exploiting the poor and because of this the socio-environmental and economic conditions of the underprivileged class at Laxmangarh is remarkably pathetic. Adiga voices out the sufferings of the subalterns by giving a vivid narrative of the socio-economical state of the village.

Born and brought up in a place like Laxmangarh, Balram’s quest to mark his identity instigate him to take up the path of crime as an easy available option among the available choices. He has realized the truth that “the story of a poor man’s life is written on his body, in a sharp pen” (27). To escape the aforementioned trap of the ‘Rooster Coop’, he has taken up a drivers’ job at Mr. Ashok’s place in New Delhi. But to his surprise, the new environmental settings in New Delhi are no way different from that of Laxmangarh with respect to the political corruptions, bribery and inequalities. The representatives of the underprivileged class like Balram who have come from the Dark to the big cities like Delhi and Bangalore are still in the Dark. They have to bore the pain and sufferings from the rich class because there is a prominent line of division between these two classes of the society, even, in the big cities. Every day they are been humiliated, harassed, subjugated, and suppressed in some or the other way by the rich class of the society. Moreover, in the cities there is a class distinction with regard to liquor intake as well, Balram says, “in this country we have two kinds of men: Indian liquor men and English liquor me. Indian liquor was for village boys like me (Balram)- toddy, arrack, country hooch. English liquor, naturally, is for the rich. Rum, whisky, beer, gin- anything the English left behind” (73). Adiga points out that *they* (the marginalized class) are even restricted to enter into the shopping malls because they don’t wear shoes. He highlights an incident where once a guard stopped a man at the entry gate of the mall and points his stick towards his sandal. He delineates that, these kind of cases were often been printed in daily newspapers under the title “is there no space for the poor in the malls of New India?” (148).

People like Balram who belong to the India of Darkness spent their whole life in struggle to escape the exploitation by the rich. Balram’s quest to survive the social evils like discrimination, marginalization, political corruptions, injustice, bribery, murder and prostitution in modern India enforces him to take recourse to crime and criminality He suffers from lot of strain, humiliation and exploitation which results in his inferiority complexes. He feels inferior to the upper class. When his Master Mr. Ashok cleverly tries to convict Balram on the charge of Pinky madam’s accidental murder, at that time, he doesn’t even tries to protest against it, but eventually develops a burning rage towards them. He admits:

“I did things I am still ashamed to admit. I cheated my employer. I siphoned his petrol; I took his car to a corrupt mechanic who billed him for work that was not

necessary; and three times, while driving back to Buckingham B, I picked up a paying customer.....instead of guilt, what did I feel? Rage” (231)

And finally he murders Mr. Ashok and steals seventy thousand rupees and fled to Bangalore where he fulfills all his dreams. He changes his name to Ashok (like his previous master) and starts up a company named The White Tiger Technology Drivers Association.

Balram’s condition can be analyzed under the purview of two theories namely— Social Structure theory and Strain Theory (a sub-theory of social structure theory).

According to the scholars of ‘social structure theory’, the stratification of the society with respect to the available economic resources plays a significant role in individual’s living style in the society, “it is social forces- and not individual traits- that cause crime” (Siegel 176). To fulfill ones’ life’s desired goals, economic resources and social support are considered to be the prime most factors. If these two supports are not available to an individual, he/she might take recourse to criminality to fulfill the desired goals. Since childhood Balram aspires to be different person and don’t want to be like his father or other family members. He doesn’t want to carry the burden of poverty on his shoulders for lifelong. Balram’s economic conditions enforced him to take up a job in the city of Delhi where he can’t escape the luring attractions of the city. He wants to live life like his master Mr. Ashok. In the course of time he murders Mr. Ashok, steals seventy thousand rupees from him and impersonates like his Master.

Strain Theory (a sub-theory of social structure theory), states that every individual strives to achieve set goals and struggles to fulfill his or her wishes. Personal experiences of strain differs form person to person. To achieve the set goals in life, every person has to struggle. During this journey, ‘strain’ in an individual arises which is the result of a conflict between set goals and the means to achieve them. Strain, born out of the failures and the seeds of jealousy, envy and aggression towards others, is identified in the individual as the “precursors to high crime rates” (191). Balram experiences strain because of the humiliation and exploitation at the hands of his master. He wants to be like them, he is envious of his master’s material prosperity and he admits that sometimes he wants to smash his master’s skull. He likes the food which rich class eats. He wants to drink the brands of liquor like rich people. These instances in his life result in strain. Strain and feelings of inferiority provoke him to smash his master’s head with a glass bottle of Johnnie Walker Black. Moreover, he admits that since childhood he wants to feel the power-control. He says,

When I was a boy in Laxmangarh, and I used to play with my father’s body, the junction of the junction of the neck and the chest, the place where all the tendons and veins stick out in high relief, was my favorite spot. When I touched this spot, the pit of my father’s neck, I controlled him- I could make him stop breathing with the pressure of a finger.

The Stork's son (Ashok) opened his eyes- just as I pierced his neck- and his lifeblood spurted into my eyes.

I was blind. I was a free man. (*The White Tiger* 285)

After Mr. Ashok's murder, Balram feels like a free man. He confesses "I've made it! I've broken out of the coop" (320) and "from now on I could play the music as long as I wanted" (286). He doesn't feel guilty, instead, he justifies for his murder and says, "all I wanted was the chance to be a man- and for that, one murder was enough" (318). He knows that he can get away with his crimes just by bribing the higher officials. He has seen his masters Mr. Ashok and his brother to bribe ministers and police officials. He says "it's amazing. The moment you show cash, everyone knows your language" (300)

To conclude, *The White Tiger* represents and explores the varied dimensions of the society and surfaces the grappling political, judicial and social system corruptions of the present day India. On one level, the novel voices the sufferings of the subaltern and deals with their problems in the society. On the other, it represents an impending threat to the society from the people like Balram who once were the victims of the Rooster Coop are now the representatives of the dominant class of the social corrupt system and commit crimes to break the Rooster Coop. Adiga tries to delineate through the story of Balram the level of corruption which runs so deep down in the society that even a person can't be acquitted, if, he commits a heinous crime like murder. It pictures the Indian socio-political system which corrupts not only people mind, but also their soul.

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