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Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

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Perils of Socio-economic Inequality - A Study of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Randeep Rana, Ph.D.

Realism and Critical Imagination

A creative artist in order to investigate and expose the problems of everyday life unmask the fundamental aspects of the socio-economic reality prevalent in the society. He or she questions the absolute notions of socio-cultural evolution and formulates an aesthetic conviction where realism appears to be inseparable from his or her critical imagination.

Sustainable development is not possible without focusing on economic and social development. Striking a balance between economic and social development, ensuring that the fruits of economic development went to all people serves the very purpose of this development. The pace of economic reforms must take into account the concerns of every section of the society.

Focus on the Plight of the Poor

India's pioneer political activists right from Ranade, Naoroji, Gokhale, Tilak, Aurobindo, Gandhi and Nehru were conscious of the corresponding perils of socio-economic inequality, injustice and neglect. This plight of the poor has remained in focus in the writings of several Indian English writers in general and the novelists in particular. Mulk Raj Anand and Bhabani Bhattacharya before the 1950s and Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga in the present times are good examples.

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Perils of Socio-economic Inequality - A Study of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Arvind Adiga

Arvind Adiga shot into international limelight by winning the coveted Man Booker prize for his debut novel *The White Tiger* in 2008. The novel, highlighting the age-old worries, anxieties of the downtrodden, is a pulsating critique of the deep-rooted socio-economic inequality rampant in India.

Postcolonial Writings on Social Justice

Postcolonial writings invoked the notion of social justice, resistance, freedom and egalitarianism in its attempt to counter dictatorial structures of racial discrimination, prejudice and ill-treatment. These writings,” emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonialization, and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre” (Ashcroft 2).

The landowners, the industrialists and the upper classes have always exercised control over the poor peasants, labourers and the working classes. This repressive and stiffening system cannot be exterminated unless the world remains divided into two stratas, the powerful and the powerless.

Ania Loomba, in her book *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism* writes, “The newly independent nation-states makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly: the dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class and the peasantry in most colonized countries”. (11-12)

Domestic Help, et al.

For the last many decades domestic servants have been an integral part of rich traditional household all over India. Due to rising economy and crumbling joint family structures there has been a spurt in the demand for this working class in the present century. Working classes particularly, Servants, Drivers, Cooks and Security guards, living beside their rich masters in the cities, watch helplessly their luxuriant lifestyle, see their glamorized world and crave an upward mobility.

In an interview with Arthur J Pais, Adiga said:

The shameless way wealth is flaunted is extraordinary. Poor people [see] the money the very rich have. Migration of labour is increasing in a big way, especially in north India. Old traditional ties and social structure in the villages and small towns are disappearing, and social unrest and resistance are growing. The naxalite [Maoist] movement is reviving in many parts of the country and is gaining strength (n.p).

The White Tiger

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The White Tiger, set in rural Bihar, New Delhi and its suburban city Gurgaon, is a sound depiction of post modern ambiguities and is a frantic desire for an enhanced social status in a society where one man's wealth is another's poverty. Adiga with a tinge of black comedy deprecates greed and corruption, rampant in the Indian Society.

The novel presents a startling contrast between India's rise as a global economy and the plight of the marginalized class of society living in devastating rural and urban poverty through, Balram Halwai, the narrator and the protagonist. Balram belongs to Laxmangarh, in Bihar, is a son of a rickshaw puller. In spite of being an intelligent and a promised child he is forced to leave the school at an early age works on a small tea-shop and has to break coal in order to support his family. He learns driving in order to earn more money. He gets a chance to meet the rich landlord and powerbroker, named 'The Stork' due to his long nose, of the village and is appointed as a driver. He is the chauffeur to drive a luxury car of his U.S.A. returned son, Ashok, settled in Gurgaon, near New Delhi.

At Gurgaon and New Delhi he often drives his master and his wife to various shopping malls and malls and is exposed to the glitterati of the 'shining? ' and 'rising?' India. He becomes aware of the immense wealth, corruption and opportunity all around him realizing at the same time that he would never be able to reach there. He contemplates over his situation and realizes that there is only one way in which he can achieve his target/aim, join the bandwagon of the affluent class/society and be a part of this glamorized world – to murder his employer, Ashok and get away with this penurious life.

Balram takes advantage of Ashok's faith and trust in him and kills him with an empty whisky bottle and along with his cousin, Dharam and escapes to Bangalore. He changes his name to Ashok Sharma, owns a Taxi company and becomes a wealthy entrepreneur in India's most technologically advanced metropolitan city.

Rising Poverty

Arvind Adiga commenting on the rising poverty and resultant crime in a programme, "You ask the question" averred :

These problems have been brewing for a long time. The causes are complex, but one common theme I find is the heightened tension within the country that's caused by the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The flare-ups can often take the form of ethnic or regional protests, but the underlying grievances are often economic(n.p).

Two Kinds of India

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While in Delhi and Gurgaon, Balram counters two kinds of India, 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, corruption and misdemeanor, ignoring all refined ways of life.

The viciousness of the 'so called modern rising and skinning India' is in stark contrast to value based traditional India as Balram claimed, "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. And only two destinies: eat-or get eaten up"(64). The inevitable result is that due to disparity in income the rich grow richer and the poor turns poorer. Balram, reverses the role and becomes 'master like servant'. He visits brothels and the red light areas imbibing Ashok's pleasure-loving obscenities and in a way satisfies his deep rooted grudge he carries against these upper classes.

Subaltern Can and Will Speak

Negating Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept that subaltern cannot speak, Adiga made Balram speak of course through crime in a manner of a typical psychopath.

Jennifer Copley has rightly stated, "While most people's actions are guided by a number of factors, such as the desire to avoid hurting other people, the psychopath selects a course of action based on only one factor—what can he get out of it. This cold-blooded mode of reasoning enables the psychopath to commit acts that most people's consciences would not allow" (quoted in Sebastian).

Silence, pain, oppression and exploitation constitute the *raison d'être* of these marginalized classes who are now globally struggling for their survival, their voicelessness, and right to self representation:

Since the marginalized have known only the language which has been handed down to them by their exploiters, they should if need be, as Fanon would have probably suggested, use the language of violence at their disposal to give at back and at the same time continue to deconstruct it from within. (Randhawa 33).

Marginalised class is entwined in sub-human social subsistence, utter deficiency, economic exploitation, representing a subculture of compliance and political subjection.

A Powerful Commentary

The novel is a powerful commentary on the ever widening rich-poor divide that has gripped India in the twenty-first century. Balram *nee* Ashok Sharma an entrepreneur is 'A Thinking Man' and not a 'mere thinker'. He has experienced the perils of socio-economic inequality and social injustice in his village and even at Gurgaon. He is, in fact, a witness to rampant corruption,

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inequality and abject poverty. He lives in the servant apartments of the Buckingham Towers B Block, infected with mosquitoes and other insects. During his sleep, “In the middle of the night... noises woke me up. The wall was covered with cockroaches...I could see their dark bodies... they kept landing on the net- and getting crushed” (131).

He is subject to humiliations, now and then, by his employers. On one occasion, Mukesh, Ashok’s brother loses one rupee coin in the car. He ordered Balram, “Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car. I got down on my knees. I snuffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee” (139). Furthermore, when Ashok tries to pacify his brother, he yells, “That’s how you corrupt servants. It starts with one rupee” (139).

Sacrificial Goat?

When Pinky, Ashok’s wife in an inebriated condition runs over a pavement dweller and kills the poor child, Balram is trapped to own the crime. Balram was forced to sign a statement accepting full responsibility for the accident:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN,
I, Balram Hawai, son of Vikram Halwai, of
Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make
the following statement of my own free will and
intention:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or
persons, or person and objects, on the night of
January 23rd of this year...I swear by almighty God
that I make this statement under no duress and
under instruction from no one (168).

His employer’s family entices him to sign a statement. “You’re part of the family.’ My heart filled up with pride. I crouched on the floor, happy as a dog, and waited for him to say it again.” (166) Moreover, his old grandmother is made a witness to the confession as well.

While in Gurgaon and Delhi, Balram has narrowly and personally experienced and seen two different ‘Indias’. One of the powerful rich and the other world of downtrodden. Adiga has used a powerful trope of ‘rooster coop’ of caged ‘chickens’ and ‘cockroaches’, ever ready to be killed. “The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they’re the next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.” (173-74).

But Balram does not want to be a ‘rooster’ in a ‘coop’, he doesn’t want to wait to be ‘eaten’ rather is desperate to be the member of the ‘eaters’. He is already aware of the rags to riches journey of Vijay, his fellow villager a poor bus conductor. Once in Bangalore, by changing his name to Ashok Sharma feels to be the part of the affluent caste and society. He is indulged in all the corrupt practices, of bribing, fixing politicians and bureaucrats, very much the part of high

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society, he learnt from his master ignoring all virtue. He encourages his drivers to ape and imitate him if they wanted to succeed in life.

Mobility Upward

In the twenty-first century, amidst the uproar of the economic boom, there grew a greater economic disparity in the society with the poor being invisible than ever before. Similarly their very existence is quite often at stake and is more vulnerable to crime. The evidence of their involvement knee-deep in crime is the rise in armed rebellions in many parts of India. Though a murder cannot be justified and the murderer cannot be pardoned, through Balram's mobility,

Adiga shows that an easy and shorter way to success is only by illegal patronage and corruption. Adiga has issued a stern to the policy makers of this nation by presenting that material advancement, a significant component for survival, can also be achieved through benefaction and using underhand means in this postmodern society.

Free Yourself from Values!

Balram realized that he will fail and never succeed if he did not forego his middle class traditional values which he possessed and has been taught to maintain right through his childhood. He realized that in this world fraught with promise and possibilities one cannot grow richer or achieve success at the cost of virtue.

Balram, is able to achieve that he craved. He is now an entrepreneur but with a cost, he at the same time is also a criminal, a murderer. He achieved success by leaving behind the traditional virtue. His success reveals that through underhand means a subaltern too can become an entrepreneur overnight. Balram's breaking the system is a clarion call for the Indian society that the traditional social structure in India is losing its ground.

Molly Joseph M rightly observed:

The novel encapsulates the resilience of the marginalized. Balram pushes his way up in life through tactful resistance and perservance. He outlives the harrowing experience of suffering and suppression that is the average lot of his kith and kin, struggles hard to become a driver, and ultimately emerges into a self taught, flourishing entrepreneur by slitting the throat of his master(77).

Balram is Adiga's 'Gatsby' realizing fully that his penurious condition made him both a misfit and unfit in the society. He was well aware of the consequences of his crime and realized that if caught it would be an end for him but taking no risk meant a confirmed and guaranteed end. He believed that in order to succeed he has to be a thick-skinned guy, in fact, truly pachydermatous.

He is symbolic of those 'new' Indian young men, who are ready to commit even more heinous crimes to achieve their target.

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Empowerment

Balram's act empowers the marginalized by retrieving their voices, spaces and identities suppressed by colonial surrogates in the postcolonial environment. His act is a rebellion against prevalent dominant ideology, cultural supremacy and investigates the petrified condition simultaneously issuing a warning for struggle of the marginalized because humiliation, resentment and grief are the fundamental components of the process of their struggle.

Thus, for the advancement and growth of the country in true sagacity, this ever increasing socio-economic inequality has to be bridged because the educated population of youth belonging to the marginalized sections is increasing at an alarming rate and their helplessness and vulnerability is obvious either from their reticent suppression or intrepid rebellion. They have a right to enhance their social status and in order to achieve this, they are in a catch22 position, to follow the path of virtue or to leave the traditional moral values and follow the dangerous road chosen by Balram because they are to survive at any cost.

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