



Research Paper

## Perceiving an Unequal World: A Study of Violence in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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**ABSTRACT:** Violence is a social phenomenon. Violence refers to any type of aggressive act committed by an individual or a community that can cause injury or harm to an individual or an animal. These violent acts can take various forms such as terrorism, physical assault, exploitation, armed conflicts and even denial of access to basic amenities. The research paper studies Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008) in order to highlight the social injustice, corruption and class conflict that become the genesis of violent acts committed by the characters. The paper explores how throughout the novel Adiga focuses on a society where violence is a social norm and the characters accept it as a part of life. They not only witness and experience it but also incorporate it into their lives. Adiga throws light on the structure of the society and how it creates a class divide- the haves and the have-nots. Poverty, exploitation, injustice and oppression become the root cause of violent actions. The paper studies how categories of class, caste, religion and party politics are treated as axis of power to promote violence and the individuals belonging to the lower strata of the society are exploited by those in power.

**KEYWORDS:** violence, injustice, poverty, exploitation, power.

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Violence is a phenomenon that is prevalent throughout the society. It manifests in various forms- physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, social and economical. It is an aggressive act that may be directed towards self, another person or animal with the intent to cause harm. The root cause of violence is the desire to attain and assert power over the other. It is this greed for power that permeates the society at various levels and becomes the primary cause for different forms of violence. In the post-modern era, economic disparity, cultural conflict, gender inequality, exploitation of resources and international turmoil has given rise to incidents of violence.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) throws light on the social structure of the society that is divided into two classes- the haves and the have-nots. Through his novel Adiga has shown how poverty, economic inequality and injustice become the root cause of violence and crime in both rural and urban spaces. Adiga uses the protagonist as his mouthpiece to lay bare the class-based division of the contemporary India.

The novel narrates the story of Balram Halwai, a man born in a small village located on the bank of river Ganga. Balram belongs to the poor section of the society with limited resources and is aware of his lower social status. In his village the chief source of employment for the villagers is agriculture. Other than that the members of the poor community earn their livelihood by doing menial jobs like working as rickshaw pullers, chauffeurs, labourers and servants. The villagers live in frightening conditions with no access to basic amenities such as clean drinking water, electricity, medical facilities, proper education and infrastructure. The stark difference in the standard of living of the upper and lower classes of the society is highlighted when Balram in his letter to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, paints a cynical picture of the country that is divided into two, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India- the black river" (14).

Born and brought up in abject poverty, Balram becomes the representative of the destitute people living a life of poverty in both rural and urban India. Describing the deplorable condition of his village he says, "Electricity poles- defunct. Water tap - broken. Children-too lean and short for their age, and with their oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India" (20). In comparison, the landlords of Laxmangarh- the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Raven and the Buffalo- live in

mansions and their children study in big cities. Balram is forced to drop out from school in order to earn money and starts working at a tea stall- wiping tables and from here he moves to Dhanbad where he becomes a driver.

Through the journey of his protagonist, Adiga foregrounds the various evils that plague the society. He lays bare the corruption and injustice that add to the plight of the poor and down-trodden. The men in powerful positions- the politicians, the businessmen, the landlords and those belonging to the higher castes- exploit the poor majority for their benefit. They use their power and position to dominate those belonging to the lower social status and limit their access to resources for a better life. This exploitation becomes a form of violence that hinders the progress of those belonging to the lower middle class. Commenting on the theme of corruption and exploitation in *The White Tiger*, Durga K in her thesis points out,

The rampant rottenness and corruption engulfing the nation are a major area of attack in Adiga's narrative. The debased socio-political and cultural scene of India - amidst its much pronounced advancements and growth - to which only the poor falls prey seems to be the writer's concern here, which he condemns through the sarcastic tongue of Balram Halwai. (24)

Through the character of Balram Halwai, Adiga paints a poignant picture of the amenities like schools, hospitals, drinking water, electricity, sanitation and roads provided by the government in exchange for votes. He shows how ministers and politicians make empty promises to the poor and uneducated in lieu of votes and never follow up on their promises after coming to power. He describes the deplorable condition of the schools, the roads and the living condition in general.

Balram Halwai narrates how the village never had any proper infrastructure or education. The teacher who works at the school steals government funds allocated for meals and uniforms as he had not been paid his wages for six months. The government hospitals are also in dilapidated condition and fail to provide safe healthcare to the poor. The post of a Medical Superintendent lies vacant at the hospital as the minister demands a heavy bribe from applicants. Politicians like Great Socialist exploit their position to meet personal ends, involving in crime and corruption to gain control and power. There are several cases of murder, rape, smuggling and embezzlement against him yet he enjoys a position of power exploiting the poor.

Adiga shows how unemployment forces people from villages and small towns to migrate to big cities in search of jobs and better opportunities. They find menial jobs with the rich where they are exploited and ill-treated by their masters. Balram describes the miserable condition of the people returning from the cities, "A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets" (26).

Balram is forced by his circumstances to leave his education and start looking for a job to support his family. Belonging to the Halwai caste, he faces abuse and discrimination on various occasions. In India, a person's caste and religion play a major role in determining his social position and those belonging to the lower castes are looked down upon. Balram is inquired about his caste whenever he applies for a job. When he asks a taxi driver for driving lessons he says, "That's what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?" (56).

Working as a chauffeur for the Stork, Balram is subjected to repeated humiliation and beatings not just by the master but also his sons. He is often asked to do odd and sundry jobs like walking the dog, cleaning the courtyard, etc. giving expression to the injustice he faces Balram says,

The Stork had a special use for driver two. I had to heat water on the stove, carry it to the courtyard, and then lift the old man's feet up one after another and immerse them in the hot water and then message them both gently. After half an hour he would say, 'the water's gone cold'. (70)

Sara D. Schotland in her article, "Breaking Out of the Rooster Coop: Violent Crime in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*" has discussed how Frantz Fanon was a profound influence on Adiga's body of work. Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth*, has propounded that violence is a constructive means of liberation and expression for the colonized. Fanon identifies three stages that postcolonial writers go through- the assimilation stage, adaptation stage and the fighting stage in which they produce a national literature. According to Schotland, Adiga's novel is at the third stage, "Adiga describes a diseased society where corruption siphons off money needed for schools, the environment and public works" (2). Adiga shows how the underprivileged are subjected to physical, emotional and psychological violence by those belonging to the higher strata of the society. Balram recounts an episode when a servant of the Buffalo is suspected of being involved in his son's kidnapping. The punishment does not end with killing the servant but extends to his entire family,

One brother was set upon while working in the fields; beaten to death there. That brother's wife was finished off by three men working together. A sister, still unmarried, was also finished off. Then the house where the family had lived was surrounded by the four henchmen and set on fire. (67)

Adiga adopts the metaphor of the 'rooster coop' to highlight the relationship between injustice, crime and violence. Balram writes to Jiabao,

The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop . . . Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space . . . Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. (174)

According to Balram it is the institution of the family that traps a man in this rooster coop and prevents him from breaking free. He feels that only a person who is not afraid to lose his family and can see them being hunted and killed can break free from the oppressive rule of the powerful. He also states that it was not for everyone, "That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature" (176). Balram understands how the poor have been conditioned in subjugation and accept their pathetic circumstances and hardly ever try to unite and fight for a better life. He satirically remarks,

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent- 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 his emancipation in a man's hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (176)

The crux of the novel lies in the rooster coop analogy, the oppressed are kept in servitude with the fear of violence which leads to psychological trauma among the oppressed. Despite being born with same potential, they are trained to think of themselves as inferior and fall victim to unjust hierarchy. When Pinky Madam is involved in a driving accident, Balram is asked by his master to take the blame on himself. The rich master uses his power and superior position to manipulate Balram to take the blame of the accident in order to save Pinky Madam from conviction and also to save their dignity and status. Balram, a driver, is treated as a dispensable pawn for their personal gain.

After being abused and suffering for years in servitude of the rich and influential, Balram holds a deep grudge and anger towards the high class society and in an outburst of anger kills his master Ashok and steals his money. His pent up rage and frustration leads him to resort to violence when he brutally kills Ashok with a bottle and steals his money that he uses to build a life for himself. He uses the stolen money to start a taxi service and becomes a successful entrepreneur. As R.K. Dhawan rightly points out in his book, *Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger: A Symposium of Critical Response*, the injustices and humiliation faced by Balram, "develops in him the spirit of revenge, revolt and vengeance against the landlord" (244).

As Bisai and Singh have pointed out in their research paper titled "Social Mobility and Crime in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*", that there is a direct connection between unjust behaviour and violent crime. Balram is abused and exploited by his master, "He has never been accepted with dignity; rather they have treated him like a beast who can easily be made a scapegoat in times of need" (459).

Adiga in *The White Tiger* shows how unequal distribution of resources and power lead to corruption, injustice, discrimination and class conflict which become the root cause behind violence in the society. Divisions on the basis of caste and class give rise to frustration and aggression among the oppressed. Balram becomes a victim of abuse and exploitation at the hands of his masters and in an ultimate attempt to break free from the 'rooster coop' he turns to violence, murdering his master and stealing his money. After committing the crime, he does not feel guilty and admits, "I will never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat" (320). By murdering Ashok, he reverses the power dynamic between the servant and the master. Balram feels no remorse for his action and proudly claims, "I've made it! I've broken out of the coop" (320). Violence becomes the solution to Balram's oppression and enables him to achieve his entrepreneurial aspirations. Having started his taxi company in Bangalore, Balram begins to emulate the behaviour of his master. He bribes the police to remove his competitors and when one of his driver's is involved in an accident, he bribes the police to avoid prosecution. Balram boasts about his changed circumstances when he says, "Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers" (259). Balram accepts that violence is a necessary tool to achieve radical reform. Aravind Adiga through Balram's journey has highlighted how corruption and injustice have become so deep-rooted and pervasive in India that the only way that a poor man can survive is by an act of aggression, however big or small.

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