



Research Paper

Class struggle in Arvind Adiga's 'The White Tiger'—A Study

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Abstract

Arvind Adiga, the winner of Man Booker Prize, describes the harsh realities of India in "The White Tiger". Adiga's portrayal of India as "India of light" and "India of darkness" (14), "Men with big bellies and Men with small bellies" (64) and "Indian liquor men and English liquor men" (73) clearly denotes the existent socio-economic antagonism in the Indian society. The people in darkness i.e. poverty find themselves in perpetual struggle against the rich people.

Balram, who is from "India of Darkness" raises his voice against the unjust system by adopting unfair means.

Keywords: Exploitation, Class struggle. Poor, Rich, Protest

The connection between literature and the social life is intimate. It is the expression of social life and thought. The literature that draws the attention of the people to the emerging truths of life, the truth that comes to the surface as a result of social struggle, is acknowledged universally. This social struggle and conflicts are termed as caste conflict and class conflict. The divide between haves and have-nots has led to class conflict. Arvind Adiga's "The White Tiger" is a vivid account of class struggle between the rich and the poor. In the novel he illustrates that the rich violates the rights of the poor and then subjugate them and the poor like "Roasters in coop" remain in the trap of poverty and never protest against the atrocities of the rich. They struggle hard to survive in the society. It is this struggle for survival that forces them to concentrate on the ways to meet their day to day needs like food, cloth and shelter. The novel gives a depiction of class warfare in Indian society that continues to exist in the globalized world of 21st century. The prevalence of economic disparity and political tensions can be said the prominent factors of class struggle. Uneven distribution of the wealth is said to be a cause of socio-economic competitions.

Laxmangarh is controlled by the four ruthless landlords who are known not by their actual names but by their animal names that they have acquired from the peculiarities of their exploitative nature. Thakur Ramdev, the father of Ashok and Mukesh, is known as Stork. He is the owner of the river that flows outside the village. He levies taxes on the villagers who fish in the river.

"The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch fish caught by every fisherman in the river and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village." (TWT :24)

The Wild Boar, the brother of the Stork, possesses all the fertile land that stretches around the village, Laxmangarh and is notorious for grinning predatorily at women of the village.

"This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around the Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. When he passed by women, his car would stop; the windows would roll down to reveal his grin; two of his teeth, on either side of his nose, were long, and curved, like little tusks." (TWT:25)

The Buffalo, the greediest among the four landlords taxes the rickshaw -pullers.

"The Buffalo was the greediest of the lot. He has eaten up the ricksha. So if you ran a rickshaw, or used the roads, you had to pay his fees -one third of whatever you earned, no less ." (TWT:25)

The Raven is recognized for exploiting people sexually who go to graze their animals on his land "The Raven owned the worst land, which was dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds

who went up there to graze with their flocks .If they didn't have money, he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him Raven .”(TWT:25)

Celebrations and ceremonies are immaterial for them and every child is commonly known as Munna or Munki. When Balram, the protagonist of the novel, was born he was not given a name. He was just a Munna. However, being human beings these poor people too nurture ambitions for their children.

Balram's journey from a son of a rickshaw puller to become an entrepreneur is a vivid account of class conflict in Indian society. The story illustrates two countries in India; country of darkness, inhabited by people of small bellies and country of light, represented by people of big bellies. Balram describes this duality of the country in the letter that he writes to Chinese premier Wen Jiabao, “India has two countries in one, an India of light, an India of darkness”. In the narration of his success story, he makes a candid confession that he has adopted all the fair means and foul to become a rich person in Bangalore, the area of light having multiple choice to thrive in. He was born in poverty ridden family in Laxmangarh, near Gaya in Bihar. He fails to continue his studies due to poverty. Though in the school he has been identified as an outstanding student and given a name “The White Tiger”.

“That what you are in this jungle” (The White Tiger: 55).

Balram's father, a rickshaw puller also wishes that at least one of his sons should get education. Only education has the power to liberate a person from the shackles of slavery. “All I want is that one son of mine- at least one- should live like a man” (The White Tiger: 30).

The desire of his father leaves a great impact on him and he realises the truth behind it.

The master-servant relationship is not healthy. It is tormenting. At Dhanbad, Balram has been appointed a driver at Stork's house but he has to do all sorts of menial work like massaging Stork's feet, shampooing dogs and pampering the children of the family. Later he comes to Delhi with Ashok and his wife Pinky. He is happy with the thought that he is away from the hardships and exploitation at Laxmangarh and Dhanbad but he gets disillusioned very soon to notice the more appalling exploitation of the poor. The poor who come to Delhi with the hope and desire of earning livelihood have to face discrimination at every step. They are forced to live either in inhuman conditions or spend nights under open sky as they are inadequately paid.

“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, and making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair” (TWT:119-120). One day when Pinky hits a boy in a drunken driving he is asked to take the blame and is ensured that his family will be given money and taken care off. Balram being novice fails to understand this strategy and signs the paper according to his master's order. This is also a type of exploitation where the rich people use their servants and drivers to keep themselves away from the hardship of the jails. In Delhi the jails are full with such type of people who have not committed the crime but are being sentenced for the crime of their masters.

“The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind the bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class master” (The White Tiger: 170).

The servants and drivers also understand the exploitative nature of their masters but they endure the exploitation to ensure their survival. People from villages come to the city to serve their master but they are not able to break the cage of the class to which they belong. Like caste, class also never leaves the person. Their agony can be felt when they say-

“We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul and arse.” (The White Tiger:170)

In India, bribing has become a practice now and this practice has intensified the chasm between the rich and the poor. Initially Ashok, who comes back to India after completing studies in America, is hesitant in following this corrupt practice. But his brother Mukesh, popularly known as Mongoose, encourages him and says-

“This is India, not America. There's always a way out here” (The White Tiger: 121).

Even the ministers do not hesitate to take the bribe. The novelist makes a sarcastic comment: “We are driving past Gandhi, after just giving a bribe to minister” (The White Tiger: 137).

India has gained political freedom but there is no change in the mindset of the people. They have not succeeded in shaking off the shackles of slavery. They have bossism of the kind that the muslim ruler and the British ruler had with the Indians. “India has never been free, first the muslims, then the British bossed us around. In 1947 the British left but only a moron would think that we are free” (The White Tiger). Corruption is rampant in schools and hospitals. The teacher has lost interest in imparting knowledge to the children as he has not been getting salary for last six months. He swindles the money that is released by the government for encouraging the presence of the poor children in the village. The doctor in the hospital is not serious in treating the patients. The building of the hospital is in tattered state. Balram who has been noticing all these corrupt

practices since his childhood raises a revolt by murdering his master and assuming a new identity of entrepreneur by establishing an enterprise in Bangalore. He comes out of the coop because he has been able to break the coop and escape. He knows that the coop is nothing but a cage of the poverty. He never wanted to be a 'roaster in coop'. In Bangalore he too becomes a part of this corrupt system. Like his deceased master he bribes the police to bring down the business of other travel agencies by bringing into their notice that the drivers of other travel agencies do not have proper license.

Poor people are rated as uncivilized monkeys and human spiders. They are 'half baked' people as they do not get opportunities to continue their studies. They are exploited by the rich for their own benefits. The poor are subjugated and suppressed. They are denied equal rights and opportunities. So, they fail to gain what they want or what they deserve. The attitude of the rich suffocates them, as a result they deviate from morality and break the shackles of moral values to get freedom. Sebastian says "However, The White Tiger should make right thinking citizen to read the signs of the times and be social conscious of the rights and duties of each one, irrespective of caste, creed or economic status, to prevent create the types of Ashok and Balram in our society" (Sebastian: 244).

In nutshell, the class warfare is the result of the gap between the rich and the poor and the exploitative attitude of the rich. The Indian society has two types of people - men with big bellies and men with small bellies. The persistent hunger and poverty lead a man toward degradation. Balram Halwai who hails from a small village in Bihar breaks the trap of caste and class to realise his dreams. He raises the revolt by adopting unfair means. Adiga does not justify the protagonist's acts; rather he indicates that the poor have to be treated with human dignity. There is a need of change in social system. If appropriate steps are not taken, this may move towards the social unrest.

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