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Snapshots of 'Real India' in Aravind Adiga's novel The White Tiger

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Abstract

The Indian English writing has undergone a sea-change ever since its inception in the 1820's when the Indians started expressing themselves in a foreign language due to the influence of the alien rulers. Initially the writings were mimetic, but gradually the genre evolved into a powerful medium for bringing to surface the social evils and problems that beset the Indian society in the pre and post-independence era. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K.Narayan, Khuswant Singh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Anita Desai, Kamla Markandaya and many other writers succeeded in capturing the spirit of 'Indianness' in their writings and focused mainly on social evils prevalent in rural India. Today, the focus has shifted because of the rapid and problematic growth of large cities all over the world. Aravind Adiga in his Man Booker Prize winning novel has shattered the myth of 'shining India' that boasts of being a hub of information and technology providing jobs to millions of people. While delineating the murky face of contemporary India, he divides the great country into 'Dark India' comprising mainly of rural areas and 'India of Light' comprising mainly of upcoming cities with shopping malls and high rise buildings. He makes it clear that darkness in the form of corruption, violence, dishonesty, unemployment, poverty is all pervasive. But the irony is that he has painted a realistic picture without suggesting any answer for the problems.

Keywords: WhiteTiger, Stork, Mongoose, Zoo, Dark India, Slave, Politicians, Police, Naxalism

1. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* has been hailed as a masterpiece describing an unexpected Journey into a new India of a youth determined to chase his dreams. He collates the rural India with the urban India to highlight the contrast between the progressive Indian cities and the regressive Indian villages and in such a situation black humour and satire come in handy. Written in an epistolary form, the novel consists of letters written by Balram Halwai under the pen name 'The White Tiger' to the Chinese Premier, Mr. Jiabo, on his proposed visit to Bangalore. Confessional in tone, the narrative revolves around the protagonist Balram Halwai and his employer Mr. Ashok through seven long chapters entitled The First Night, The Second Night and so on so forth, and the writer minces no words while disgorging his anger over the prevailing conditions in 'Shining India.' The purpose of Mr. Jiabao's visit is to know the truth about Bangalore and to learn how to make a few Chinese entrepreneurs.

Balram, the protagonist reports to the Chinese Premier in angst, "Sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs" (The White Tiger 4). Balram is the strong voice of the underclass in which the subalterns, landless labourers, unemployed youth, poor auto drivers, servants, prostitutes, beggars and underprivileged figure. The misery and problems of this part of 'dark India' are compounded by the corrupt Indian political and bureaucratic set-up. Nimsarkar and Mishra opine "Adiga feels that in India the disparity between the rich and the poor is just a fact of life, which has been there since ages" (18). Right in the beginning of the novel, the horrible pictures of paucity, extreme poverty, shocking state of education and health in rural India send chill down the spine and show that the subaltern "have no representative or spokesperson in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer and get marginal place or no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential part as human beings (Krishna Singh 98). It is poverty which makes the parents of Balram forget to name him.

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Keep a count of his age and to withdraw him from school despite promise. Balram “The White Tiger” is pushed into a world of drudgery working in a tea stall washing utensils and breaking coal. Balram’s father who was a rickshaw puller lived and died in penury, but he always nursed the desire to see at least one of his sons get educated and live life as a man: “My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine at least one should live like a man” (The White Tiger 30). Balram comments sardonically, “If the Indian village is a paradise, then the school is a paradise within a paradise” (The White Tiger 32). Corruption has percolated to the roots and the teachers know how to siphon off govt. funds they are expected to spend on improving the standard of education. As Sudhir K.Arora says, “This corruption has entered even in the temple of education. The teacher steals the money of the government scheme for providing *roti* and *dal* to each student on the plea that he has not got his salary for a long time. Even the people know it but don’t blame the teacher” (87). The harsh reality of govt. schools is that there are no dusters and chairs in the class and the teacher who is to lead the hapless children from ‘the dark India’ to the ‘India of Light’ keeps chewing *paan* and splashes the jet on the walls. The school inspector who once visits the school finds that all the students except Balram are dull and hardly know anything and his piercing eye notices the spark in Balram and observes, “ You young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation? I thought about it and said, ‘The White Tiger.’ ‘That’s what you are, in this jungle’” (The White Tiger 35). He suggests him to change the school, “You need to go to a real school—somewhere far away from here. You need a real uniform and a real education” (The White Tiger 35). The process of real education for ‘The White Tiger’ starts when he is forced to work along with his brother in the village shop to pay off family debts the family had incurred on the marriage of his cousin. Disinterested in work at the shop, he becomes a target for other boys when they repeat the inspector’s words and laugh boisterously. No amount of insult and humiliation could dampen the spirits of Balram who is determined to do something new in life.

The village is a veritable *jungle* wherein the rich landlords drain the last drop of blood from the bodies of the poor and still make them feel obliged to them. They are the ‘rural gods’ referred to as Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar and Raven signifying the peculiarities in their appetite. As Pratibha Nagpal says, “Together they form a mafia that controls everything – the river, the agricultural land, the roads and the hill side” (153). All of them lived in high-walled mansions, having their own wells, ponds and temples. They didn’t need to come out into the village. They bribe all the political parties and the bureaucracy to garner all sorts of benefits. With the emergence of Naxalism they have sent their offspring either to Dhanbad or Delhi. These are the ‘two Indias’ within the ‘dark India’ wherein the rich live in plenty but the poor youngsters while away their time: “Things are different in the Darkness. There, every morning, tens of thousands of young men sit in the tea shops, talking to a photo of a film actress. They have no job to do today. They

know they won’t get any job today. They have given up the fight” (The White Tiger 54). From this chaotic state of affairs Balram wriggles out after taking driving lessons for which his brother shells out money. All of them look for a good time ahead when he will be sending a major part of his wages home.

The journey of Balram from the village or ‘Dark India’ to Delhi ‘the city of Light’ starts much in line with his wishes when he gets an opportunity to work as driver for Stork’s America- returned son Mr. Ashok and his Christian wife Pinky Madam. The honest driver decides to “drive them whenever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant—god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress, Ram and Sita” (The White Tiger 46), and his joy knows no limits as he says, “I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness” (The White Tiger 14). He has always been inquisitive, and even now, listens to the conversation of his master and other people while at work as he is not an ‘original thinker’ but definitely ‘an original listener’. Much to his shock and disbelief he soon realizes that the people from ‘dark India’ cannot easily free themselves from the rigmarole of exploitation. They sleep on the roads, footpath or in cramped rooms specially made for servants. They come to city in search of light but remain in perpetual darkness.

The urban society representative of the ‘India of Light’ is westernized in manners and culture soaked in consumerism. They have plenty of money to spend on wine, women and clothes, but are too mean to let servants lead a decent life. Behind the immaculate exteriors of the big hotels, shopping malls, wide roads lies that ugly reality which no political establishment is ready to admit and eradicate. Balram soon learns that this world holds no promise for the poor and many of his kind are languishing in jails for the misdeeds of their masters. The irony is that the people from the dark India have been brought up with the ethos that salvaging the master from a difficult situation is a matter of pride. Mongoose, in connivance with Mr. Ashok, cleverly makes Balram sign the papers wherein he owns the responsibility for killing a child which had been, in fact, killed by Pinky Madam in a state of drunken driving when there was hardly anyone on the busy roads of Delhi. This incident reveals the true picture of Delhi, the capital of a great country, where unidentified people are killed on the roads and such cases are not even reported. For the poor the problem of survival, of earning two-square meals is more pressing than seeking help from the police which is neck-deep in corruption. As Sudhir K.Arora asserts, “Delhi jails are full of drivers not because of the crime they have committed but because of the crime of their masters which they have taken on them. This is again the abuse of the capital that purchases a poor man in the name of faithfulness and devotion. Drivers go to jail loyally for their masters” (169). Elections are a farce in this democratic country where the results become a foregone conclusion. Votes are purchased or bogus voting leave the genuine voters stunned but the mighty and the powerful know how to gag the voice of the people who ‘think’. Savitri Tripathi writes, “Slums become the topic of discussion during election months and rest of the months are only for the rich and the politicians. All these are facts, and the young writer Aravind Adiga dares to depict the real situation of dark

India (202). Prostitution is encouraged by the protectors of law but the irony is that corruption has not touched even this area untouched. The glamorous world of film industry is also a part of this murky world; values have gone haywire and everything is justified to move up on the ladder of success. Balram, after learning a lot about this Delhi society from his own observations and from fellow drivers with whom he hardly likes to spend time, decides to decamp with the money that Mr Ashok honestly delivers at the door-step of political leaders of all hues. The change noticeable in this promising young man from 'dark India', who was not yet bereft of values that we Indians so proudly boast of, is a stark reminder of the reality that very few are ready to accept. Balram is sure that he can take advantage of Mr. Ashok's magnanimity in giving poor a part of their due. In his village he would have called him 'a lamb' because he is so unlike his class.

After killing Mr. Ashok, Balram establishes himself as a successful 'entrepreneur, in Bangalore – a world famous city which the Chinese Premier wants to visit. There is every possibility that his entire family may have been annihilated by the Police or the landlords in an attempt to know about him – a fugitive. No system seems to be working in India as Balram is not hiding anywhere but leading a comfortable life, bribing the police and other officers as Mr. Ashok used to do. Share the booty with those who matter in Indian society – this is the mantra Balram has not only learnt but also successfully tested its efficacy. Dharam, Balram's nephew, being a part of this city culture knows that home-sickness won't not help, if he keeps his uncle's secret without ever being the former's confidante, he would keep getting his chocolates.

2. Conclusion

The I.T. Revolution has changed the face of the Indian society. Migration from the villages or 'dark India' is continuing as they also want to live like 'a man'. Affluence coupled with success is badly required so there is no harm in sacrificing the health of our 'future' who work in call centres to make even other countries grow. Aravind Adiga is definitely ringing the warning bells by telling in clear terms that we have to draw a line now, failing which this sudden transformation will leave us in a state of no return.

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