

Balram Halwai the Class-Conscious Proletarian: A Study of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger critique the common man's life in modern day India by narrating the journey of his protagonist Balram Halwai from the village to the city. The narrative unfolds the harsh realities faced by the working-class people in a class-conscious society and the transformations that takes place in Balram's life. Through the letters written by the protagonist to the Chinese Premier, the novel highlights Karl Marx's concept of revolution and class struggle. The paper attempts to portray the impact of class system in contemporary India.

Keywords: Revolution, Class System, Class Consciousness, Exploitation, Servitude, Injustice and Survival

Social stratum is classification of people into a set of hierarchical social groups. People are generally categorised based on how rich or poor they are. These kinds of stratifications clearly manifest the inequalities and the constant conflicts that are present in the society. Karl Marx a German philosopher, an incredible ideologist and a prolific writer questions the age-old traditional ways of segregation of people under class systems. *The Communist Manifesto* written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels is a seminal work that analyse and critique the society in terms of class relations.

Marx formulated many revolutionary theories in the time of booming socio-economic changes that sprung from scientific breakthroughs and emergence of modern large-scale industries. He propounds that society is composed of two main class of people with competing interests, the bourgeoisie being the wealthy ruling class and the proletariat are the poor working class. His theories clearly disprove the claims of the bourgeoisie system of dominance that exploits the proletariats who belong to the lower stratum of the society. The emancipation movement set forth by Marxism aims at abolishing the accumulation of wealth and economic power of the bourgeoisie by seizing their political and legal authorities. Thus,

Marxism as a political theory challenges the deep-rooted stratification of society and advocates class struggle and revolution of the proletariat until the establishment of classless society without exploitation.

In the vast realm of contemporary Indian English Literature, Aravind Adiga has carved a niche as a profound writer whose intriguing narratives explore and confront the societal complexities of modern India. His literary works incisively capture the hidden realities of human experience thereby reflecting the innumerable socio-political concerns that resonate around the world. Aravind Adiga rose to prominence with the publication of his debut novel *The White Tiger* which won him the prestigious Man Booker Prize award in 2008. Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel serves as a means for Adiga's exploration of the struggle of the marginalised and the disparities in India.

Balram writes a series of letters to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier who is planning to visit India. The letters recount his life story of how he becomes a successful entrepreneur and poignantly describes the poverty, corruption and class struggle that still exist in modern India.

Balram is born in a village called Laxmangarh in Gaya district which is in the throttle hold of the most acquisitive land lords who are identified not by their actual names but by their animal names that define the characteristics of their exploitative nature. In the novel they are described as animals dwelling 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 Stork owned the village river and forced the boatmen to pay a toll for crossing the river. His brother, the wild Boar compelled the poor villagers to work on his field for meagre wages. The Raven who possessed the 'rocky hillside around the fort' took a fee from the goatherds who used his land for grazing their flocks. "If they didn't have their money, he liked to dip his beak inside their backsides, so they called him the Raven" (25). The Buffalo was the avaricious of the four landlords who pockets one third of the wages of the rickshaw pullers. Consequently, life in Laxmangarh becomes despairing.

The history of all hitherto existing society² is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster³ and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a

fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Marx and Engels 9).

Balram Halwai who belong to the working class, a son of a rickshaw puller spends his early life in utter misery and penury. He observes his parents wrestling to make both ends meet. His father Vikram Halwai, a poor day labourer grapples throughout his life to fulfil his wife's wish to educate his son, he says "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" (30). Balram has no name until he goes to school. He is known as Munna meaning boy, his school teacher names him as Balram, later a school inspector impressed by his exceptional intelligence complements that he is the rarest of creatures like a 'white tiger' an identity which he carries till the rest of his life. Unfortunately, Balram is forced to drop out of school to pay back the debts of his family, he goes to work in a tea shop in Dhanbad along with his brother Kishan. However, he claims to have learnt the greatest lessons of life from the "roads and the pavements" (302).

At the tea shop Balram overhears two customers conversing about drivers earning a lot of money and decides to learn to drive. He persuades his grandmother to send him money to pay for his driving classes. Eventually he becomes a chauffeur for the Stork's family. At their house he is subjected to humiliation and degrading treatment by his masters. He is often asked to do menial jobs like sweeping the floor, cleaning cobwebs, taking care of their dog and so on. "The Stork had a special use for driver number two.... I had to heat water on stove, carry it into the courtyard, and then lift the old man's feet up one after the other and immerse them in the hot water and then massage them both gently; as I did this, he would close his eyes and moan. After half an hour, he would say, 'the water's gone cold'" (70). While talking about the injustice faced by the workers, he narrates another episode where a servant of the Buffalo is suspected of being connected with his son's kidnap. The punishment does not stop with killing the servant but it extends to his family members too "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). Balram vehemently express how the under privileged are put through, physical and emotional violence by those belonging to the ruling class.

He wanted to get away from the unpleasant squalor and dreadful conditions existing in Lakshmangarh and is determined to abandon his village for a better living. He soon switches

his job from being a house driver to Ashok's personal driver by deviously dismissing another driver named Ram Prasad. His family too permits him to accompany Ashok to Delhi with the hope that they will be redeemed from the 'darkness' of the village.

Within a short span of his time in Delhi, Balram understands that class conflict between the affluent and the impoverished was also prevalent in the well-developed cities. He realized that "in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there were just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat-or get eaten up" (64). He witnesses the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor in the city. It is seldom that the upper class of the society care for the hardships undergone by the poor. "Thousands of people live in 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 heads while the cars roar past them" (119-120).

The working class, servants, drivers, and the poor understand the cynical nature of their masters but they tolerate the oppression to secure their survival. "We have left the villages, but the masters still own our body, soul and arse" (169). Balram also remarks how corrupt and atrocious was the public life of his master Ashok, who gives away the hard-earned money of his villagers as bribe to the politicians, so that they turn a blind eye to their underhanded business. The rich live by their own rules and their abiding ascendancy is preserved even by adopting fraudulent ways. The poor slog for the growth of their rich masters, neither they are given an opportunity to achieve their dreams nor do they grab one. Nevertheless, Balram desires to stand out as he becomes fully aware of the brutal realities and decides to come out of the "Rooster Coop," a metaphor that he uses to illustrate the enslavement of India's poor. He tells the Chinese Premier that "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, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, 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" (173).

While accompanying Ashok and his wife Pinky on several occasions, Balram has noticed the opulently comfortable and carefree life lead by the elite and how they manipulate unscrupulously for their selfish needs. He narrates how he had to wait for long hours, was devoured by mosquitoes, run errands, buy whisky and wine, sometimes also cook, and make

tea for his masters. Perhaps a revelation happens when he is forced to take the blame of an accident committed by Pinky madam. Balram is shattered and feels absolutely mortified for being cheated by his master. He had to write to the police:

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN,

I, Balram 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 this year. That I then panicked and refused to fulfil my obligations to the injured party or parties by taking them to the nearest hospital emergence of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.

Signature or thumb print:

(Balram Halwai) (167).

This inhuman treatment from his master smacks of his class consciousness and ignites the already blazing desire of becoming an entrepreneur. He begins adhering the pervasive ways of his master. “The proletarians have nothing to lose but the chains. They have a world to win” (Marx and Engels 46).

Balram Halwai who stands as a symbol of the ‘Darkness’ and the class consciousness in which he was enchained since his birth perceives that he can create new avenues for the deprived classes if he is able to climb up the ladder of social status. This yearning impels him to break the shackles of traditional and moral conventions. Therefore, he endeavours to subvert the menacing divisions by revolting against the symmetry of class structure. He records that:

Only four men in history have led successful revolutions to free the slaves and kill their masters, this page said:

Alexander the Great.

Abraham Lincoln of America.

Mao of your country.

And a fourth man. It may have been Hitler, I can't remember. But I don't think a fifth name is getting added to the list anytime soon.

An Indian revolution? (304).

Balram is of the view that a revolution is imperative to change the oppressive scenario, however feels that people wait for others to fight for their freedom which he says will never take place and profess that each individual should stand for his own cause and battle for his independence.

By the end of the novel, we see him becoming a part of his master's class. Utilising the money he stole from Ashok, he starts his own business of taxies by the name "The White Tiger." Though he learnt all the tricks and traits of the business from his master, when he becomes a wealthy businessman, he never repeats what his scheming masters did. He treats his workers with dignity and respect, never cozen or betray them but tries to be a quintessence of business professionalism through his behaviour, in the hope that his people would succeed in their life. He also envisions to establish a school for the poor children in Bangalore since education alone can emancipate people from the nexus of oppression.

start a school – an English – language school – for poor children in Bangalore. A school where you won't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi – nothing but the facts of life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers, unleashed on Bangalore! We'd have this city at our knees, I tell you (319).

In all his ventures, Balram who hails from the working class asserts to overthrow the bourgeoisie who were for a long-time acquiring wealth and power. Karl Marx in his *The Poverty of Philosophy* propounds that a revolution was inevitable and would be caused by constant exploitation. He says "... on the eve of every general reshuffling of society, the last word of social science will always be: Struggle or death; bloody war or nothing. It is thus that the question is inevitably posed "(215). Marx proclaims that a proletarian revolution was necessary to free the workers from continued oppression and to create a democratic working condition.

Balaram's consequential behaviour after murdering his master Ashok indicate, though he was doubtless about the gravity of his crime, he states that the killing was needed, to liberate himself from the clutches of servitude. Ashok has no concern for Balram and compels him to take the blame for an accident, it was this empirical moment that made him

fathom that even in his wildest of dreams he cannot cross the line and get to the other side of his class. Though it cannot be ruled out that Balram was triggered by the betrayal of his master, his act of violence can never be justified. However, the novel deliberately slips judgemental absolutism, hence Ashok's murder by Balram Halwai portrays both the struggle against oppression and a significant descent into depravity.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* throws light on the social structure of the society that is divided into two classes, the rich and the poor. His narrative shows how poverty, inequality and despotism become the underlying cause for violence and crime both in the urban and rural areas. He blatantly discusses the perils of class-based violence in modern India. The protagonist Balram Halwai's struggle and success signifies a metamorphosis from thralldom to freedom, a transformation that construct a distinct microcosm that closely mirrors the macrocosm of societal hierarchies and class dynamics.

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