



**MORAL AMBIGUITY IN ARVINDA ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER:
A CONTEMPORARY NOVEL**

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ABSTRACT

In the novel The White Tiger, Arvinda Adiga has depicted the life of the main character Balram Halwai who belongs to the lower strata of the society. Since he belongs to the lower class he has no bright chance of becoming successful. But Balram is an ambitious man who chooses a profession of driving and consequently, visits Delhi with his master. In Delhi he sees an entirely different picture of India. He feels surprised to see wealth and prosperity all around and needless to mention corruption and brutality present in the society of upper class people. To improve his future he kills his master who looks down upon the servants, takes his money and runs away. Balram in some ways justifies his action of sin as if he has taken the revenge from the whole upper class society. Though later, he feels guilty. Through the letters which Balram writes to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabo, Adiga shows the bleak picture of India which includes casteism, class division and corruption in the government policies etc.

Keywords: *Morality, Corruption, Light, Darkness and Class*

The Paper throwing light on the themes of morality and corruption in the novel and their strong presence and absence in Indian political culture and society. The main character's personal successes are based around corrupt acts which act as the catalyst for virtually plot development. Though the protagonist Balram has moral sense but he drops it behind to become successful and established man. He becomes corrupt to fulfill his dreams. In the part "Sixth Night" of the novel Balram accepts how he got corrupt: "Over the next two weeks, I did things I am still ashamed to admit. I cheated my employer. I siphoned his petrol; I took his car to a corrupt mechanic who billed him for work that was not necessary; and three while driving back to Buckingham B, I picked up a paying customer." (The White Tiger 230) The novel portrays a very dark side of everyday India where corruption is common and often necessary for career advancement or social reputation. There are serious problems facing India in the 21st century, and there is a great debate as to which problem should be a top priority. Along with corruption, problems like the negative impact of globalization, social inequality, religious tension and conflict between social classes also present a case for being the largest hindrance to Indian progression.



Through Balram, the main character and narrator, the writer claims to tell the Chinese Premier and also his readers, about 'the real India. 'Instead of cracking down on corruption and help create a new political culture, India and its leaders show no desire to move beyond the status quo. Adiga decides to divide the country into two, and with ferocity he asserts that there are two Indias, which he calls Darkness and Light. Balram Halwai has come from what Adiga calls the Darkness-the heart of rural India- and manages to escape his family and poverty by becoming chauffeur to a landlord from his village who goes to Delhi to bribe government officials. Balram Halwai is the son of the rickshaw-puller. His father 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" (The White Tiger 30) Corruption has a ripple effect through society and although corruption takes place between political parties and upper class businessmen, the middle and the lower classes suffer the most. Moreover, those same people have no choice but to desperately indulge in corruption in order to excel.

An impressive feature of the novel is how Adiga exposes two very different portraits of India. The Light and Darkness refer to the economic condition in different areas of India and really emphasize on the inequality that exists in the country. Balram's narration, especially later in the novel, does not glorify his actions or achievements but uses his actions to portray how moral ambiguity is a commonly accepted practice. Balram Halwai is a complicated man; Servant, Philosopher, Entrepreneur; Murderer. Over the course of seven nights, Balram recounts his terrible and transfixing story of how he came to be a success in life-having nothing but his own wits to help him again.

The novelist critiques the social, political and religious aspects that make up Indian national identity, as it happened in the novel because of the administrative system, and it is no longer existed in modern India. All aspects are divided based on the caste lines between the poor and the rich. Adiga quotes the lines: "To sum up in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. In the modern context of India there are two castes: "Men with Big Bellies, and men with Small bellies, and only two destinies: eat and eaten up" (The White Tiger 64) The novelist's irony brings out the fact that the present India and in the era of globalization, the entire system appears to be owned by the capitalist rules of the survival of the fittest.

The novel, a trenchant critique of contemporary India, bypasses the superlative of the economic boom to tell the story of an India that is savage and dark. It strips away the image of shining India to reveal a society that is indulged in corruption and injustice: where the poor are invariably the victims of brutal class system. Balram's quest to becoming an entrepreneur shows the oppression of the lower caste system and the superiority of the upper caste. He tells the story of how India still has a caste system and political economic corruption is still



present. Balram shows the country of India in which a person high on the caste system can bribe people such as police officers with money to cover up murders, sabotage political opponents by rigging votes and money, and have privileges such as shopping in a mall specifically for those of high social and economic importance. He also shows the side of India in which those who are born into poverty and low castes may forever remain there and so will their children. Balram is a rare exception, as he experiences both sides of caste system and manages to move up the social ladder. As Ashok comments to his wife Balram Halwai is a low class fellow “The thing is he probably... what, two, three years of schooling in him? He can read and write, but he does not get what he has read. He’s half – baked. “The country is full of people like him.” “The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half baked fellow is produced.”(The White Tiger 10)

In fact, the novel is a brilliant and unflinching vision of modern India- presented in the forms of seven letters to the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabo by the murderous protagonist before a highly sanitized state visit. Through Balram’s personal story of murder and uncertain success, we are drawn into the vortex of India’s underbelly where the narrator says “The story of a poor man’s life is written on his body, with a sharp pen.”Hardly there is anything in this book that escapes scathing comment. Democracy is a corrupt sham. Besides, commencing from Bangalore Adiga widens his vision and sketches the picture of modern India and says:

Please understand Your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an India of light and India of darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings daarkness to India –the black river.

(The White Tiger 14)

Balram lives in the village he grew up in and was destined to be lifelong member of India’s struggling lower class. However, Balram dreams of a different life outside his village and its financial and social limitations. He works in the rural village of Dhanbad at a local tea shop and while working he decides to learn how to drive after learning about the high wages driver can earn. Balram’s big break comes when a rich man known as Stork hires him as his driver. The Stork has achieved notoriety and his nickname through skimming from the profits of local fisherman. He is the first person to expose Balram to real corruption and also acts as his ticket out of impoverished life. Balram goes on to be the driver for the The Stork’s son, who lives in New Delhi, also referred to as the “light” of India. Balram is to find a way to access the world he sees while driving the son through the parts of India he never thought he would be part of. Now Balram realizes that all the facilities and comfort belong to the upper class people from inside he develops a feeling of hatred towards the upper class.



An impressive feature of the novel is how Adiga exposes two different portraits of India. Within the novel there are two sides of India known as the “light and the “darkness.”The light and darkness refer to the economic conditions in different areas of India and really emphasize the inequality that exists in the country. Ironically, the actions that often bring one light to the darkness or from the bad to good are morally questionable. It seems that one needs to abandon values learned in the darkness in order to escape into the light. Basically, to live in the light one needs to be dark or bad, whereas if one’s lives in the darkness, one’s morality might have a chance of staying intact. Balram’s narration, especially later in the novel, does not glorify his actions or achievements but uses his actions to portray how moral ambiguity is a commonly accepted practice. While it is true that there are many wealthy people living in India lavishly, there is also a vast portion of the population living in contrasting conditions.

Adiga impressively manages to express the scale of disparity between rural and urban India through his protagonist, Balram. A resonating part of the novel comes when Balram recalls a former teacher of his while growing in the “darkness”. His recollection is powerful in the sense that it really explains the two different worlds within India. Balram reveals that while there was a government funded lunch program in his school, the students never saw any of the food. He goes onto claim that the students knew why and it was because “the school teacher had stolen our lunch money.”The students do not blame the teacher however because he had not received salary in six months. As Balram’s thought so eloquently put it...you can’t expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet”. And perhaps that analogy pertains to more than just the teacher but India as well. How are impoverished Indian expected to refuse to engage in when they live in such poor conditions? The system must be held accountable, not the people themselves. Adiga beautifully relates that moral ambiguity is bound to happen in such circumstances. People are forced by their poor condition to commit immoral acts. Balram eventually concludes that the only way to immerse himself successfully into the world he sees while driving Ashok around is to kill his employer. The murder is successful, as Balram slits Ashok’s and steals his even hundred thousand rupees intended for political bribes. He takes the money, moves to Bangladesh, changes his name and establishes his own taxi company. The same man who felt remorse for outing a fellow driver as Muslim, had little issue with murdering for career advancement. However, because he is able to feel remorse, he remains very human and his immoral acts seem much less immoral. After his new taxi company takes off Balram fulfills his dream of distancing himself from the rural India by living in the light as wealthy entrepreneur. He even changes his name, which is a means of avoiding persecution, but also a means of officially starting a new life as successful, urban, corrupt citizen.

Balram is a unique type of protagonist because although the reader sympathizes with his life in the darkness and hopes his pursuit of light is successful his methods are immoral. However those immoral acts are overlooked along with the corruption, is a perfect example of the end



justifies the means. That is likely the most appropriate description of most pursuits of propensity in India, especially if coming from rural poverty. It is not about how you get there, but what you get there at all. Everything else is excusable. Adiga is well aware of this mentality and uses it to his advantage in the novel by using the reader as an example. We find that so many brutal acts Balram commits, but again the system takes the majority of the blame, while the individual goes unscathed.

The White Tiger is a novel about the new India in our de facto father tongue that speaks in a voice that Adiga could have only achieved through sensitive observation and analysis, by creating and killing and resurrecting the narrator protagonist in his head million times. Poverty degenerates and does so without leaving any scope for sympathy. The narrator Balram Halwai's story is sad, almost tragic one, of how the victim becomes the victimizer because has no second choice. We admire Balram knowing well that he is a criminal. Everybody is guilty and a thin line separates the law abiding but desperate man from and capitulation. But while everybody is a thief not everybody is a White Tiger- the survivor who lives to tell the tale. The White Tiger does not try to simplify the situation in India or glorify corruption. Rather, Adiga uses Balram, to give an accurate occasionally humorous depiction of the lengths people will go to in order to remove themselves from poverty. The novel ends with The White Tiger's meditation about the business called life.

Therefore, one can draw conclusion that The White Tiger is a realistic mirror of contemporary India in which one can look at the another world which is still untouched or deliberately not touched by those claimants of India shining or India rising towards new millennia. The incisive engrossing novel attacks poverty and disparity without being sentimental or condescending and shows moral ambiguity is a much accepted practice, and for this reason it is ground breaking Indian novel.

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