

“The White Tiger” On Half Baked India and Social and Political Deterioration.

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Everyone censures corruption at a societal stage but that does not mean that anyone has escaped from the flu of corruption. It is not an infection in one country. People worldwide are involved in the act of corruption. India is no exception to it. Corruption in India has even crossed the alarming stage. From the officials of the highest rank to a peon, everyone is corrupt. Many big problems such as poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, pollution, external threats, underdevelopment etc. are posed in front of the Indian government. Having a glimpse at all these problems faced by India, one might notice that corruption plays an important role in making these problems even bigger. India is still facing poverty due to corruption. The government and its employees all are corrupt so the schemes floated by the government for the betterment of poor are not properly implemented and just because corruption comes into play the grant advanced to the poor does not reach them and they remain the same and so does the problem of poverty.

Over the past couple of years, India is driven by vertiginous economic growth and the country is dazzling by the glow of its own success. It has come out with an identity of ‘economic miracle’. But this is a superficial view because what does an ‘economic miracle’ mean when even a casual acquaintance with India shows that a very large majority lives in abject, shocking poverty, that the gap between the rich and the poor is a vast, unbridgeable, ever-growing chasm, and that social redistribution policies are either unenforceable or have failed? Who exactly is benefiting from this growth?

We people are nauseated by the epidemic proportions corruption has acquired in India. It is literally under every stone you turn. It is also in every alley you turn into, every nook and cranny you might care to peep into. It happens as much in broad daylight as it does behind closed doors. It is as much a part of my life as it is of yours. It may be as much because of you as it is because of me. If there is corruption in society, each one of us is responsible. It is wrong to blame the system. Why do we separate ourselves from the system? Don't we vote the corrupt to power? Don't we endlessly suffer from all deprivations and refuse to raise our voice? And then when it becomes too much, we cry. Now a day we shell out money so that we don't have to spend half our day in a queue at the municipal office. Is it not more pertinent to ask how these serpentine queues are created? Are we short of staff in an overpopulated country with a large section educated but unemployed?

Corruption is the symptom of a disease that has as its progenitor's over centralization of power, non transparency in all government functions and lack of accountability. Crores from development projects are siphoned off annually to Swiss bank accounts before anybody notices anything amiss. The voice of the common man must rise. Hit out at political corruption because the largest quantum of money is transacted there. Even worse than the fake honest politician, is the genuinely honest one. In India, corruption is a form of patronage; a politician or bureaucrat who takes the bribe then has to let it cascade among a series of lesser bureaucrats and elected officials, who will make sure that the pet projects are completed. An honest politician has no googlies to toss around. This limits his effectiveness profoundly, because political power in India is dispersed throughout a multitier federal structure; a local official who has not been paid off can sometimes stop a billion – dollar project. This is why many Indians have a sneaking suspicion and there is anecdotal evidence to back this up – that only corrupt politicians are effective ones. But we must remember that corrupt politicians are produced by a corrupt society. In India, corruption is something we all learn to live with. But wait! We need not be resigned to it or cynical. Instead of breast beating over the sorry state of affairs, we need to explore the solutions.

Once in a while it happens, that singular voice breaking through the polyphony of India Imagined. A voice that defies the received wisdom of the Great Indian Marketplace of Metaphors and brings to the rustle of the ever increasing number of pages a new note of anticipation. India, currently perhaps the most anatomized item on the writer's table, deserves such an intervention. It does more than break the monotony, the tedium of aspiration.

Arvind Adiga, at 33, steps out of the highway of 21st century India, takes a vantage position on the sidewalk, and as a country of 36,000,000 gods and maybe more dreamers and doers who are all set to breach the borders and conquer the world zooms past before his eyes, blinks.

The White Tiger is a novel born in that infinitesimal moment of darkness. And as a debut, it marks the arrival of a storyteller who strikes a fine balance between the sociology of the wretched place he has chosen as

home and the twisted humanism of the outcast. With detached, scatological precision, he surveys the grey remoteness of an India where the dispossessed and the privileged are not steeped in the stereotypes of struggle and domination. It is written as a letter from an entrepreneur in Bangalore to the Chinese premier on the eve of his Indian visit. What emerges from the letter that spans over seven nights is a portrait of a man and his country.

Arvind Adiga takes on some hefty issues: the unhappy division of social classes into haves and have notes, the cultural imperialism of the First World, the powder kedged anger that sweetness among the world’s dispossessed, and entrapment. But his skills as an author protect the novel from becoming one of those horrible didactic stories in which characters and plot are little more than mouthpieces and vehicle for delivering Great Truths. The White Tiger entertains and gives pause for thought. This is a good combination.

The White Tiger is the debut novel by Indian author Arvind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and won the Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel provides a dark comical view of modern day life in India through the narration of Balram Halwai, the main character. The overall main theme of the novel is the contrast between India’s rise as a modern global economy and the working class people who live in crushing rural poverty. Other themes touched on include corruption endemic to Indian society and politics familial loyalty versus independence, religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims, and the experience of returning to India after living in America, globalization, and the tensions between India and China as superpower countries in Asia.

The protagonist of the Adiga’s novel, Balram lived in the village of Laxmangarh, a fictional village in Bihar, a community deep in the “Darkness” of rural India. The son of a rickshaw-puller; his family is too poor for him to be able to finish school. Despite being clever and being promised a scholarship, Balram instead in forced to work in a teashop, breaking coals and wiping tables in Dhanbad. His parents originally named him “Munna”, but his schoolteacher Mr. Krishna wanted to give him a new name since Munna simply means “Boy” in Hindi. He named him Balram. The name Balram refers to the brother of the Hindu god Krishna. His last name, Halwai, is derived from “Sweet maker” in the caste system.

In Dhanbad, he learns to drive after learning about the high salary paid to drivers. After learning how to drive, Balram gets his break when a rich man from his village, known as “The Stork” in his village because of his penchant for taking a cut of the local fishermen’s profits. Hires him as a chauffeur. Balram then drives for The Stork’s son, who lives in the city of New Delhi. The city is a revelation and eye opening experience for Balram. As he drives his master and his wife to shopping malls and call centres, Balram becomes increasingly aware of immense wealth and opportunity all around him, while knowing that he will never be able to gain access to that world. Through these experiences, Blaram learns much about the world and later states that the streets of India provided him with all the education he needed.

Having recently returned from a stint in America, Ashok, one of the Stork’s sons, is conflicted by the corruption and harshness of life in India. He also has to deal with his family’s unhappiness for marrying his current wife, Pinky Madam, as the two of them married in the US, not in India, which causes them to lose respect in the caste system. Ashok’s father also did not approve of the marriage because Pinky Madam is of another caste.

As Balram broods over his situation, he realizes that there is only one way he could become part of this glamorous new India – to murder his employer, Ashok, and escape from servitude. However, Ashok’s participation in funding political corruption leads to his liberal and free thinking spirit’s demise and gives Balram a chance to become an entrepreneur. One day as Ashok is carrying seven hundred thousand rupees in cash as money bribes for politicians in New Delhi, Balram decides to murder him. The murder is a success as Ashok’s throat is lashed, propelling Balram to flee to Bangalore with his nephew Dharam. With the seven hundred thousand rupees he stole, Balram creates his own taxi company and changes his name to Ashok Sharma. Thus he becomes a wealthy entrepreneur in India’s new technological society and emerges as a part of the top caste in the Indian society of the Light, namely the world belonging to rich people who live in large urbanized cities.

When we go through the novel we come to realise that the story oozes with a sense of what it must be like for a young person growing up in a modern Indian Village with no familial support or economic means to make it in life. The main character is an intelligent and literate young man, who was born an outcast but has miraculously risen to become a rich man’s driver in the capital city of Delhi. Upon hearing a radio broadcast of his Prime Minister telling his Chinese counterpart that India is a very civilized and virtuous society, he decides to do the unthinkable and write the Chinese premier and tell the real side of the story. What the reader gets here is the rough and rude reality of that it means for many Indian children growing up in an irrational environment that uses and abuses them for criminal and sexual purposes. While the government has banned the caste system where people are perpetually assigned to hold menial jobs, it still flourishes in all parts of Indian life. “White Tiger”, the name given the young boy while at school, becomes his moniker as he makes his way into the nefarious world of corrupt officials and crime bosses. Because he is literate, he has become groomed to be a driver and lackey for a rich family in Delhi. While some might see this as a step up in terms of ascending the

social ladder of Indian society, it is anything but. Balram becomes quickly acquainted with, and be expected to handle, the mistiest of situations that involve murder, cheating, bribery, and stealing. It is from behind the wheel of a Honda Civic that this keenly intelligent young man tells this engrossing story as he wends his way from place to place in the big city, doing his master's bidding. His fellow chauffeurs, meanwhile, are simply pawns who are not aware of the role they play in the bigger picture. They are the helpless ones who are being exploited by a very unjust and dishonourable society intent on making them its doormat. The reality of all this is that even the virtuous like Balram need to stoop to conquer. We find him gradually getting sucked into the routine of committing the odd venial misdeed in order not to be ostracized by his fellow drivers. If anything, this book is really a profound study of how corrupt practices can destroy good intentions in any society.

"The White Tiger" echoes masterpieces of resistance and oppression. But Adiga depicts the modern Indian dilemma as unique. Intense family loyalties and a culture of servitude clash with the unfulfilled promises of democracy. Early in the book, a school inspector says about Balram, "You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In this jungle, you are the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along once in a generation."

The creature of which he speaks? The white tiger, of course, Adiga's "half-baked" protagonist (Balram calls himself that because he dropped out of school early, but credits his half formed nature with ambition: "Entrepreneurs are made from half baked clay") sets out to fulfil this promises. Names hold particular significance in a country where everything seems to be in the middle of a transformation. The poor finally get a whiff of opportunity, enough to incubate hope; the rich live like kings in a shiny, new world where servants are expected to respond to their every whim, even to serve prison sentences for crimes committed by their masters.

"The White Tiger" juxtaposes the extremes of modern India through Balram's exploits as a driver. The careless impulses of his master, Mr. Ashok, often have devastating consequences for Balram. Ashok carelessly plays games on his cell phone while his driver contemplates the end of his life as he has known it. Through Balram, Adiga exposes the absolute devotion of the servant class.

"Never before in human history have so few owned so much to so many..... you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse".

Balram evolves to see the injustice of having to choose between family and self, slavish devotion to the master and autonomy. There seem to be two futures available: "in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India" These days, there are just two castes; Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies, And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up. "Balram seeks a third option: to break free from the class of the eaten.

"The White Tiger" contains passages of startling beauty from reflections on the exquisite luxury of a chandelier in every room, to descriptions of skinny drivers huddled around fires fuelled by plastic bags. Adiga never lets the precision of his language overshadow the realities at hand: No matter how potent his language one never loses sight of the men and women fighting impossible odds to survive.

"Things are different in the Darkness. There, every morning tens of thousands of young men sit in the tea shops, reading the newspaper.... They have no job to do today. They know they won't get any job today. They've given up the fight."

Throughout the novel, what sets Balram apart from his family, fellow servants and even employers, is that he never gives up the fight.

At first, this novel seems like a straightforward pulled up by your bootstraps tale, albeit given a dazzling twist by the narrator's sharp and satirical eye for the realities of life for India's poor. But as the narrative draws the reader further in, and darkness, it becomes clear that Adiga is playing a bigger game. For the White Tiger stands at the opposite end of the spectrum of representations of poverty from those images of doe-eyed children that dominate our electronic media – that sentimentalize poverty and even suggest that there may be something ennobling in it. Halwai's lesson in *The White Tiger* is that poverty creates monsters, and he himself is just such a monster.

In *The White Tiger* we watch Balram suffer humiliation after humiliation and is expected to take it. His employee's wife gets drunk one night and forces Balram to let her drive and she kills a child. They make him sign a confession saying he was driving just in case the police decide to press charges. It's taken as matter of course that, as their servant, he would only be too glad to go to jail for them. After all, you can't really expect them to go to jail, now can you?

Balram's letter to the premier of China is like the confession of a Catholic penitent to this priest, save for one detail. He's not seeking absolution for any crimes he has committed; he's just using himself as an example to let the premier know the facts of life in modern day India. Bribery and corruption are what grease the wheels of the great economic miracle of India, wheels that are still being turned by salve labour. Underneath the statues of Gandhi and behind the pictures of the beautiful temples is corruption so ingrained that it's taken for granted as being the way things are and always will be.

The picture Arvind Adiga paints of India in *The White Tiger* is of a nearly feudal society disguised as a democracy. If even a tenth of what Balram describes as normal operating business is actual, and there is no reason to believe otherwise then India's economic miracle is a much a lie as China's. The country might have gained its independence from the British at the end of the 1940's but the majority of people in India are still trapped in servitude.

Adiga is so good at imagining the life of the outcast that the novel is an often scary reminder of the pitfalls of overlooking the plight of the underprivileged. When Balram drives his master around Gurgaon, the sight of scantily clad women is a shock to him – not just because women in the Darkness do not dress provocatively, but also because he is humiliated by his inability to have a slice of the 'fast life'.

Balram, ineluctably altered by the ways of the city, calls himself a “social entrepreneur” – symbolic of the plan he devises to escape the servant's fate. The plan is bloody and entails permanent damnation, but he executes it and moves to India's other boomtown, Bangalore, where as head of a taxi service company, White Tiger Technology Drives, he finally makes a name for himself.

Adiga's debut novel is a highly realized work – a dazzling brutal look at the unsavoury side effects of India's rapidly globalizing economy. Adiga's style calls to mind the work of Munshi Premchand, that great Hindi prose stylist and chronicler of the nationalist movement, especially in passages like this : “A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank”, but the “story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen”. We would probably be right to describe the impulse of Adiga's fiction as a kind of social realism, contemporary India offering just the sorts of conspicuous contrasts on which such writing thrives. He is too canny an observer to labour under romantic illusions about the poor; the failures of India's old left are good reason not to expect any immediate redemption from that quarter. The author's optimism tends in a different direction.

Adiga might overstate the point, but he is surely right when he writes that ‘the difference between... This India and that India (is) the choice’. Cut through all the rhetoric and it is probably true that where India offers more cause for hope than China is in the possibility that with economic freedom might come a measure of the political and social liberalism which was the foundation of progressive change in the west.

He observes thoughtfully that, in cities all over the country, people sit under lamp posts at night and read. Men huddle together and discuss and point fingers to the heavens. Which is not to say that the Indian Revolution is night, but it certainly says something. When the dust from all the new construction has settled, Bangalore (and the many places like it) may turn out to be a decent city, more decent than the brutal world its immigrants have left behind.

Adiga's narrator quotes with approval the Urdu poet Iqbal, who said, :”They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world” Perhaps that line, and the novel, serves as a manifesto for the sort of writing that the new India needs but isn't getting enough of.

The author writes about poverty, corruption, aggression and the brutal struggle for power in the Indian society. India is sometimes like a Bollywood film, which the poverty stricken masses enjoy watching, to forget their daily problems for two hours. The rich Indians want to give their gastrointestinal tract a rest and so they go to the cinema between bouts of pan spitting and farting due to lack of exercise and oily food. They all identify themselves with the protagonists for these hundred and twenty minutes and are transported into another world with location shooting in Switzerland, Schwarzwald, Grand Canyon, the Egyptian Pyramids, sizzling London, fashionable New York and Romantic Paris. After twelve songs, emotions taking a roller coaster ride, the Indians stagger out of the stuffy, sweaty cinemas and are greeted by the blazing and scorching Indian sun, slums, streets spilling with haggard, emaciated humanity, pocket thieves, real life goondas, cheating businessmen, money lenders, snake girl destitute charmers, thugs in white collars and the big question : What shall I and my family eat tonight ? Roti, kapada, makan, that is, bread, clothes and a posh house are like a dream to most Indian dwelling in the pavements of Mumbai, or for that matter in Delhi, Banglaore, Mangalore, Mysore, Calcutta and other Indian cities, where they burn rubbish for warmth.

Balram's is a strong political voice and mirrors the Indian society which wants to present Bharat in superlatives : superpower, affluent society and mainstream culture, whereas in reality there's tremendous darkness in the society of the subcontinent. Even though Adiga has lived a life of affluence, studied at Columbia and Oxford universities, he has raised his voice in his book against the nepotism, corruption, in - fighting between communal groups, between the rich and the super rich, a dynamic process in which the poor, dalits, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's children of God (untouchables), ‘scheduled’ castes and tribes have no outlet, and are to this day mere pawns at the hands of the rich in Hindustan, as India was called before the Brits came to colonize the sub-continent. *The White Tiger* is a compelling first novel about the new India that is growing roots all around us, in unexpected and often ominous ways.

India to a wafer thin minority of less than 5% of the total Indian population of over 125 corers appears to be shinning. These persons who are living in fool's paradise are quick to point out that Indian is ranked as the 4th largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) calculations by The International Monetary Fund

and World Bank. The 2009 Forbes Rich list mentions 52 Indian list includes some family fortunes, and the combined net wealth of the top 100 Indians stands at \$276 billion, which is equal to 25% of the GDP. According to global estimates the illegal accounts of top Indian politicians, industrialists and corrupt government employees in Swiss Banks stands at \$1456 billion, an amount which is more than 13 times the Indian foreign debt. This figure is more than the total amount of illegal funds of the rest of the world in Swiss Banks. You can again add a few thousand persons here and there holdings huge amounts of wealth domestically, and it does not take a genius to calculate how disproportionately the wealth is distributed. The final figure will comprise of a few thousand politicians industrialists and government officials holding a lion share of the nation wealth.

Like the Ostrich one cannot bury ones head in the sand and pretend not to notice what is going on around us. The basic human needs like food/clothing and shelter if not met will most certainly lead towards chaos. There will be mass looting and rioting, when one is deprived of the basic necessities of existence there in nothing else one can do, it is a natural reaction. In the current free-market love fest to which India has been invited – the country boasted GDP growth of 9.6 per cent last year – ‘inequality’ is a word that has been successfully airbrushed out of existence.

Elsewhere, everyday India (the old India) limps, coughs splutters and throws up a good deal of blood. One of every six Indians continues to live in the shadow of insurgency. Farmers with little access to irrigation and devastated by failing crops continue to kill themselves. And nearly 300 million Indians remain unsure of where their next meal will come from. Arvind Adiga’s riveting, razor-sharp debut novel explores with wit and insight the realities of these two India’s, and reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of the other.

The novel has taken a lot of flack because it doesn’t paint India in very favourable light Author Arvind Adiga has been steadfast in his portrayal of his India. To justify it he says that if this is the way India is, then why try to hide the truth ? We should not take this novel as an attack on the country; it’s actually about the greater process of self examination.

Gridlocked in corruption, greed, inhumanity and absolute inequality – of class, caste, wealth, religion – this India is unredemptive. What Adiga lifts the lid on is also inexorably true: not a single detail in this novel rings false or feels confected. The White Tiger is an excoriating piece of work, stripping away the veneer of ‘Indian Rising’. Adiga speaks for the millions of underprivileged downtrodden people and gives them a voice through literature.

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