

**REPRESENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA THROUGH  
ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*****SHRIKANT N. PURI**Head,  
Department of English  
Lokmanya Mahavidyalaya  
Warora, Dist. Chandrapur**ABSTRACT**

*The existence of any country has been wrought by authors and thinkers. A literary work can never detach itself exclusively from societal concerns. The socially devoted writers stand as a guiding light in the darkness of human life. Indian writers have always, directly or indirectly, involved with contemporary social, political and economic veracities. Indian English fiction has recorded the history, socio-political cognizance, shifting cultures and civilizations since colonial times. So, it is intolerable to isolate the fictional world from the contemporary truths. Adiga is not an exception in depicting contemporaneity of the era that he represents. The present paper attempts to understand representation of contemporary India through the study of the *The White Tiger* by Adiga.*

**Key Words:** Truth, Allegory, (New) History, Reality, Democracy, Politics, Religion, Corruption, Rooster Coop,

Shakespeare says in *Hamlet* that the play (literature) is a mirror hold to nature (society). In another sense, literature consciously or unconsciously copies and imitates its surroundings. Therefore, it is helpful to understand and study the then society. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, J. Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, Charles Dickens' novels, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and many other works exposed the contemporary truth. They reveal the true nature of their contemporary societies; they show how corrupt and hollow England was, when it was praised for its prosperity, integrity and idealistic government policies. Many writers put their protagonist in the allegorical situations which show the background of the age. The protagonists of Patrick White, J. M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o etc and all the post-modern writers represented their nation in allegorical form. They exposed the 'truth' of the so called civilized, developed and modern society in which their protagonist lived. This is the form which Arvind Adiga has adopted for his Booker Prize winner and debut novel *The White Tiger*. He puts forth the 'truth' of so called contemporary developing and progressive India. On the platform of the world, India is developing. It is dreamt that India will become the world's supreme economic power by overtaking the economic growth-rate of China. It is also doing better in the field of electronics, power, space etc. However, there is the 'darker' side of India which is known to every person living in slums and rural India. Adiga, while receiving the man Booker Prize, says his novel -

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*attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India — the voice of the colossal underclass. The exigence for The White Tiger was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" – the impoverished areas of rural India. ([https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXW0buco/wiki/The\\_White\\_Tiger.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXW0buco/wiki/The_White_Tiger.html))*

The present book is a kind of letter written to Wen Jiabao, the Premier of China. Balram Halwai alias The White Tiger is an entrepreneur in Bangalore. When he hears on radio about the arrival of Chinese Premier to Bangalore, India, Balram letters his story of a successful businessman to Jiabao. He calls his story as “The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian”. (10) The present book is not merely the life-story of an Indian. It is the history of majority of the contemporary Indians, who live in the Darkness, in an allegorical sense. Mr. Ashok remarks, the low educated Balram can

*can read and write, but he doesn't get what he's read. He's half-baked. The country is full of people like him .... That's the whole tragedy of this country. (10)*

Adiga has shown how the influence of religion brings about the regressive impact on the thoughtless people. They follow the character of god named Hanuman, particularly, the one which is found almost in every village and colony in India. Adiga calls Him “a saffron-coloured creature, half man half monkey” and “the faithful servant of the god Rama.” (19) He is a perfect example of mental slavery, honest service and devotion to His Master. This god reminds us about our identity of being a servant. ‘He’ is present all over in India in the form of statue. We learn from Him how to obey and please our employers without dishonesty. But we are never inspired from Him to be greater and better than our masters. In India, there are also gods who are worshiped by the rich persons and where the poor rarely goes.

Adiga also criticizes the people living in the Darkness for their belief in the number of gods. They waste their time worshiping some or other gods. They also hold these gods responsible for their misfortunes, and pay tributes to them in the form of various offerings as told by the *Pujaris*. (19) We have authentic news and reports regarding such superstitious beliefs and blind practices followed in the Darkness in the twenty-first century also. A film or an epic start off by praying or praising a god, while Adiga ironically starts his novel with kissing some or other god's arse. (8) In the confusion to whom to kiss, he counted the number of gods present in India. He accounts one Muslim God, three Christian gods and 36,000,000 Hindu gods as options for him. (8) The scriptures and the myths in them, particularly written after the Vedic Period in India, are elaborately woven to cultivate the anti-rational attitudes among the majority of the illiterate people. They believe these stories without taking any doubt or question. Asking questions about religion or these mythical stories is considered as a grave sin. Therefore, the religion becomes an obstacle for India to become the world's supreme economic power.

Visibly, India is an integrated country with diverse things like religion; but internally, there are many disputes and crags in it. Irony of ‘Hindu and Muslim *Bhai-Bhai*’, is shown from the instance of Ram Prasad, the driver of Stork, the coal mine owner. He is originally a Muslim.



He hides his religious identity and takes a Hindu name for his survival. When he is identified, he quits the job without taking his last salary. If he had asked for it, he would have been beaten to death for his disguise. The Muslims are satirized for being ‘illiterate or covered head to toe in black burkas or looking for buildings to blow up?’ (40) The persons of Nepali origin or migrated from Nepal are considered as less trustworthy. There are many such instances narrated in the novel.

Casteism is another current issue in the India of Darkness. This issue has been in practice since thousands of year. Although, the severity of the casteism is softened, it is not stopped all together. It has been dealt with in literature by many writers from the last many centuries, but in the contemporary progressive India, its roots are still firm. The protagonist, Balram is from the Halwai caste – the sweet makers. It is considered as one of the lower castes. The persons from this caste are not expected to become aggressive or drivers. The bus conductor, Vijay, is from the pig-herd caste. It is one of the lowest castes. When he becomes conductor, people say that he had sacrificed his honour by letting the Great Socialist do what he had liked. The working class (labourers) in city is described in their worst conditions. Mr Ashok was also told by his father and brother not to marry Pinky madam, because she was neither of their caste nor of their religion. In the present India, all this can be witnessed.

The superstitious nature of Indians is also described in the novel. The friend-drivers of Balram commonly believe, ‘Any diseases, of body or mind, get cured when you penetrate a virgin.’ (192) There are rumours. One of such rumours is that a person stopped believing in God and his buffalo died. “Next day he said, ‘God I’m sorry, I believe in You,’” (186) and his buffalo came back to life. In Indian culture, the dead body of a person is worn the new clothes, it does not matter whether the person had worn the new clothes when he was alive. The dead-body is either burnt on the bank of the river and the ashes are flowed into the water, or the body is sometimes simply dropped in the river. There are many such examples of superstitious beliefs in Indian culture.

The Ganga, a sacred river in India, is also recorded in the novel. The superstition about the river is that it washes out all of our sins, if we take a dip in it. It is “Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth.” (15) However, Balram, the mouthpiece of Adiga calls it ‘the black river’ and the ‘river of Death’. (14) It is full of dark, sticky mud and so many nasty things. He also narrates the incident of the cremation of his mother’s dead-body. He describes how the dead body was carried over to the bank of the river through mud and how the ashes flowed in the water. There in the river at some distance, some buffalos were enjoying the water. The drainages and sewage water were guided into the river. The politicians each time of election promises to clean the Mother Ganga, but each time they forget their promise. Balram advises the Premier, Mr. Jiabao not to have a dip in it. (15)

Adiga, further, recorded the darker reality of the profession called Police. Our up-to-date crime investigation system is full of breaches. When Balram kills Mr. Ashok and runs away, his picture is sketched and pasted at the public places. His sketch is

*a photograph: blurred, blackened, and smudged by the antique printing press of some police office, and barely recognizable. (39)*



Many Indians can appear like the man in portrait.

Most of the time, police just follow the procedure of publishing the poster, the clarity of it is never minded. Although they know the culprit, most of them let him / her go free. For more extortion, Balram remarks, 'You can give the police all the brown envelopes and red bags you want, and they might still screw you.' (320) Instead of catching you, some of them will help you hide, till the time you bribe them. Once the offering of bribes stops, they blackmail you or put in jail for the crime you had committed long before.

The working system of police in India is also focused on in the book. Balram foresees the investigation of his disappearance. He says, they would have questioned the shopkeepers, bullied the rickshaw pullers, and woken up the schoolteacher, would have asked nasty questions about the character of Balram. They would have smashed and "forced out 'confessions' from one or two people." (39) They use their force and third degree treatment to a person to accept the committed or alleged charge. The alleged persons accept the crime just because of the third degree treatment. Some of the policemen prefer their caste and religion to their duty. They wear 'the red marks of religion' on their forehead. (300)

Balram also narrates one accident that is made by one of his taxi-drivers. In the police station where the case was to be registered the assistant commissioner 'was a man whom I (Balram) had lubricated often.' (308) Further, Balram ironically comments on the corrupt police officer when he comes to help Balram. He says, 'There is honesty among thieves ....' (308) The brother of the dead boy threatens the police officer for not registering the F.I.R. The corrupt officer replies the threat by saying that the evidences will be destroyed by tomorrow. Balram also narrates his own experience of killing a child by car. Actually, the child is killed by his owner's ex-wife. But Balram was forced to accept the blame.

The police in the India of Light are amazingly successful; however, the police (most of the cops) in the India of Darkness are equally disgracing. You can commit any of the worst crimes and never be found guilty by giving bribes to the police. Every day, many small crimes are committed, and they are neither recorded nor noticed. Every small crime has its fixed rate (bribe-rate) for not noticing or recording it. Once you commit a grave crime, then you will become a permanently regular payer (briber) to the police. To save yourself from noticing, you have to bribe regularly or whenever it is demanded.

Since the World War Second, democracy has become the famous form of government. It is considered as more refined and cultured form of government than monarchy, dictatorship or communism. Balram compares India with China and ironically says, 'We may not have sewage, drinking water, and Olympic Gold medals, but we do have democracy.' (96) Indians boast of our democratic government, and curses China for its communism. However, China is superior in every realm to India viz. technology, living standard, economic growth, fundamental needs etc. Mr. Ashok holds democracy responsible for the backwardness of India.

The record of the elections is also penned in the novel. People talk about the election as if they could turn the whole India upside down. The party members promise so many things to them. But when the members of parliament / assembly are elected, they forget the promises,





voters and their problems. In the next election, the same members come with same promises to befool the ‘common man’. But at the time of election there is the tensed atmosphere in Indian cities and villages. Like typhoid and cholera, election is a worst disease. It

*makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in... like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh. (98)*

Balram tells his first experience of voting. His tea-shop owner had already sold their votes, that is, the inky fingerprints on the ballot paper. (97) Although it was a common practice in near past in the Darkness, today the situation is changed to a better condition. Votes were bought and stolen by the party members. Those who went against these members, they were lynched to death. Balram once had witnessed such a thing. One of his villagers was lynched to death for demanding for his right to vote which was already stolen (voted someone else for him). Police was the eye-witness, but did nothing. The assistant of the minister says, ‘... Elections, my friend, can be managed in India. It’s not like in America.’ (212)

The symbol of the Great Socialist’s Party is so ironical – “a pair of hands breaking through handcuffs – symbolizing the poor shaking off the rich.” (97) In fact, he never cares for the poor, and he is the most corrupt person in the novel. Each time of election, he promises the same things; after election he never fulfills his promises and the necessities of the villagers. He is a criminal. He lives in Delhi and demands bribe from the coal or steel contractors.

The bureaucracy is a gift by democracy. The persons in the service are as corrupt as their policy makers. Both of them, in real sense, are servants of common men. But in reality, they behave as if they are the employers. They get less salary, but they earn many times more than their salary by using unfair ways of exploiting subject. (33)

The parliament and assembly have plenty of corrupt and criminal leaders. Balram says, one of such leader is accused of

*... a total of ninety-three criminal cases – for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-smuggling, pimping and many other such minor offences – are pending against the Great Socialist and his ministers at the present moment. (97)*

However, Indian judiciary system, indirectly, supports these leaders. It takes more time to solve the case. Meanwhile, the eye-witness and proofs are either bought or finished (murdered or threatened), so the crime is rarely proved. (214) In some cases, the most tragic thing is the judges. ‘They take their bribe, they ignore the discrepancies in the case.’ (169)

Democracy is equal to corruption. This corruption is coiled around contemporary India like an anaconda, which will never set free this country. Day by day, new policies and laws are framed to control the corruption, but all are useless. The only thing happens that the new ways are discovered to escape from the new laws; and the corruption goes on as it was earlier.



The dialogues between the leader and the coal contractor show how the bribe is offered (forced) to excuse the income tax by forging and neglecting the facts. The Great Socialist rebuked the Stork, the owner of Balram,

*Bullshit. You've got a good scam going here – taking coal for free from the government mines. ... I said (demanded) a million and a fucking half, and I mean a million and .... (104-05)*

The condition of the drivers is worst in India, particularly in India of the Darkness. He has less work of driving, but meantime he has to perform all the other servants' duties.

*In India – or, at least, in the Darkness – the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants. (68)*

Balram had to perform odd works; when he is not out for driving. (68) They stay in the old half ruined rooms or a room in the basement without proper accessories or furniture. Moreover, Drivers often accept the accidents and crimes committed by their owners.

However, Drivers, whenever get a chance, rob their owners by various ways like selling petrol, producing the extravagant bill of repairing, selling empty liquor bottles, using the vehicle as taxi, etc. Moreover, some of them, like Balram, murder their owners for money.

Traffic in India is worse. In rush hours, vehicles walk at the speed of tortoise stopping at every signal. Meantime, the beggars or the magazine/ newspaper sellers knock at the windows. In the villages, nobody knows traffic rules, they follow just mutual understanding.

Dowry system, a tradition in India, is recorded in the novel. Balram narrates the incident of the marriage of his cousin. He writes,

*Because we were the girl's family, we were screwed. We had to give the boy a new bicycle, and cash, and a silver bracelet, and arrange for a big wedding – which we did. (36)*

His family had taken a big loan from a landlord for the wedding and dowry of his cousin. To return that loan, Balram had to leave his school and worked in a tea shop. Now the White Tiger (Balram), who 'comes along only once in a generation', was breaking coal hitting it against the brick. Another incident is of the marriage of Balram's cousin, Kishan. They got five thousand rupees cash, a Hero bicycle and a thick gold necklace for Kishan (51). However, the rich have dowry system and divorce system too. They have 'no respect for God, for marriage, family – nothing.' (183)

Adiga through Balram describes the villages in the Darkness. It is proudly said that our culture is retained in the villages. But their condition is worse. They have dearth of basic amenities like electricity, water and food, yet the dream of becoming the World's supreme economic power is nourished. (19-20)

The sewages, drains etc in villages are not well built and planned. They are open-ended. Water overflows from them on the roads.



*Down the middle of the main road, families of pigs are sniffing through sewage – the upper body of each animal is dry, with long hairs that are matted together into spines; the lower half of the body is peat-black and glistening from sewage. Vivid red and brown flashes of feather – roosters fly up and down the roofs of the houses. (20)*

Moreover, buses come rarely and irregularly. No other means of transportation are available. Within village you have no option, other than cycle-rickshaw. The slums in the cities are worse than the villages. They live where they leave their waste. Their hut is made of tin, fiber, and thick papers. They do not have electricity, fresh water, etc. Their children play in mud near the acid and fluids flowed down from the industries. Nobody think of their health and other basic amenities.

In villages, there are extractors like the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Raven and the Buffalo. They have their reserved areas to bully, harass, and exploit the people. They also have fixed ways to punish the villagers who disobey them.

The condition of Schools and Schoolteachers in India of Darkness is also recorded in the novel. There was only one schoolteacher in the village school where Balram used to go. The teacher of Balram was “a big paan-and-spit man”. (29) His expectorate coloured the walls as red wallpapers.

Students used to imitate him. There are many gaudy policies for the students in the village schools for their holistic growth. But in reality the situation is different. Balram exposes,

*There was supposed to be free food at my school – a government programme gave every boy three rotis, yellow daal, or pickles at lunchtime. But we are never ever saw roties, or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money. (32-33)*

He also sold a truck with uniforms that the government had sent for school-children. However, no one blamed him for this. Balram ironically justifies the stealing of things by the teacher. It happens in many schools in India. The teacher said, ‘he hadn’t been paid his salary in six months.’ (33) The condition of the schools is no better than that of teacher and the policies. There are no required facilities available. When the school was under inspection, the school inspector finds no duster, no chair and no uniforms for boys. (34)

The persons in the village can be divided according to their drinking habits. Balram comments,

*... in this country we have two kinds of men: ‘Indian’ liquor men and ‘English’ liquor men. ‘Indian’ liquor was for village boys like me – toddy, arrack, country hooch. ‘English’ liquor, naturally, is for the rich. (72)*

The corruption is everywhere. In cities, one can get foreign wine in cheap rate from the embassies which they sell in the black market. (127)



Adiga does not forget to write about the historical facts of Naxalites. He has given an incident of kidnapping and later on murdering of a landlord's grandson by the Naxals. Adiga also mentioned the terrible future of the family of the person who looked after the grandson. All of them were brutally killed by the landlord.

The condition of the Government Hospital is the worst in the contemporary India. There is always the scarcity of doctors, nurses, medicine, equipment and sufficient furniture. The compounders use the building as barn for their goats. Doctors are appointed, but they are regularly absent in the Government Hospital. At a distance they have their own clinics. There they wait for the patient patiently. Balram narrates how his father died of tuberculosis. He also gives an account of other patients who suffer because of various diseases. They wait for the doctors in the nasty, comfortless hospitals restlessly. Their relatives with them are helplessly watching the agonies of the patients. But no one comes to rescue them from their trouble. Many of them die in the hospitals without getting seen and treaded by the doctors for whom they have been waiting since days. These doctors regularly bribe their supervisor at the district branch. The supervisor excuses the absence at the cost of bribe and signs doctors' fake report of regular presence and observance (treatment) of the patients at the hospital.

Prostitution is found almost all over the world, sometimes it may be referred to by another name. In metropolitan cities, there are some areas identified as 'red light area / zone'. Everyone knows about it, and still it is active. No one can stop it forever, and still many boast of their culture. Balram has given ample examples of such areas and encounters with prostitutes and their pimps. He also told that there are categories in the area according to the need of the customers (the rich or the poor) and according to the customer's demand (virgin, young, middle aged, silky hair, Nepali, foreigner etc).

The psychology of the Indians is like roosters. They can see the unjust disaster of their fellow rooster (neighbour), yet are neutral towards their upcoming utter disaster. Our psychology does not permit us to revolt against the situation. Instead of revolt, we prefer to follow the Gandhian way – to show the second cheek if you are hit on the first – to face the injustice passively. Balram very beautifully creates the image of the psychology of the Indians. The roosters are packed tightly in a stench-case. They are choked-full there that they do not get place to move on even for shitting. The butcher shows off 'the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not try to get out of the coop. (173) Adiga gives another example of the rooster coop through God Hanuman, the faithful slave to his master King Rama. (19) Actually, He was a prince, but He devoted Rama and become His slave. He never desired to be a Master. He enjoyed being only a Servant. Therefore, His real worshippers never desire to be masters or to do better than what their masters had done. Asking questions or going against their master is considered as a sin. This and other myths indirectly affect the psychology of Indians. Balram says,

*A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (175-76)*





We are not like Europeans, where separate-family is preferred. We are bound (psychologically) to our family. Wherever we go, we think of the betterment of our family and always try to uplift it by aiding something somehow. In Balram's words: 'The Indian family' (176) is also a kind of coop. He knows the Stork will hunt, beat, burn and destroy his family. (176) But Balram stops thinking the future (misfortune) of his family. Therefore, he succeeds to break and come out of the coop. He became master from a slave by breaking the shackles of the tradition (coop).

Balram had many rooster coops. First, he had family. Second, he was a Hindu who believes in gods (Hanuman, etc) and myths. Third, he was honest and innocent (after watching the illicit behavior of Mr. Ashok, he become corrupt and vile). However, the last coop in his way to be a master / entrepreneur was a chit from the weight machine at the railway station. It is read as, 'Respect for the law is the / First command of the gods.' (248) It shows the trapping of the common persons in the coop. The rich, the policy and law makers (politicians), and the myth creators rarely follow the laws; rather they propagate and urge others to follow the laws. But they are role-models for the poor to break the law. However, after breaking the traditions or laws, with the help of money they escape from the punishment or stigma. But the poor are caught and punished and branded with a permanent stigma on their character.

However, Balram got the answer of his question in an Urdu poem. He wanted to come out of the coop, but had no key to open it. It simply means he wanted to break the barricades which restricted him to become a master / entrepreneur. They are his caste, his psyche, his family and the myths of servitude. A poem helped him to be out of the coop which had no lock. The poem is read as: 'I was looking for the key for years / But the door was always open.' (267) He kills his master and runs away with a great haul to Bangalore. He succeeds in getting out of the coop. In Bangalore, he changes his name, deletes all the ex-contacts, and starts a new business / entrepreneurship.

Thus, Adiga has recorded the truth that is found in the contemporary India of Darkness. No doubt, India is on the way to become a 'developed' country and the world's supreme economic power. However, at the same time it should not forget to make improvements in the areas that are highlighted in the novel. Although it is a fictional book, the writer has not gone far from the reality. Beyond doubt, he is satiric in his recording of the facts. But the aim of a satire is to stimulate the subject to make positive changes in it. If there are two types of India within one country, it will be in vain to boast the progress in any of the realms. So, the efforts should be made to bridge up the lacunas given in the novel, and lead the nation, in the real sense of the terms, to the status of 'developed nation' and the supreme economic power. One must think optimistically like Balram,

*I might sell everything, take the money, and 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. (319)*



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