

Destitution and Economic Inequality in India: A Study of Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract

As India completes seventy years of independence, the bipartite structure of economic divide remains a national challenge as there seems no end in sight to the entrenched split. In the novel *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga highlights how this issue has taken a toll on the lower strata of the society in both rural and urban India and explores the reasons why the downtrodden do not see any light at the end of the tunnel. Adiga compares not only the lives of the haves and the have-nots but also the prospects that both the sections of society have in India. The novel is an audacious attempt to render the deep miseries of those deemed as a failure on the economic scale very keenly as well as to represent the repercussions of any injury inflicted on the influential very patently.

KEYWORDS: Economic divide, India, Dependency, Politics, Capitalism.

Introduction: Economic disparity has become a worldwide concern in the contemporary era. However, the cavernous gap between the affluent and the downtrodden in developing nations due to political upheavals, corruption and lack of education and social reforms, as well as dearth of robust monetary policies has widened over decades, leaving a large chunk of population below the poverty line. All the nations in South Asia, including India figure indubitably in the list of such countries. Although India features at a better spot compared to rest of the nations in South Asia on developmental front, yet [as reported by *The Hindu*] according to United Nation's Millennium Development Goals (MDG) programme, India had 21.2% of the population living below the poverty line during 2011-2012. Besides that, the economic disparity in the country is equally staggering. It has been estimated by Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook for 2014 that the richest 10% of the population own more than 70% of India's wealth.

Many novelists have responded to the grave issue of economic division and poverty across the globe. While authors like John Steinbeck, S.E. Hinton, Cari Luna, Kurt Vonnegut etc., have explicitly depicted the bifurcation on basis of wealth in the West, authors like Mulk Raj Anand, Arundhati Roy, Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai etc., represent the predicaments in India vis-à-vis economic stratification.

The novel

The White Tiger (2008) by Adiga voices the issues of entrenched poverty and stark economic division in India. Additionally, through the master-slave narrative, the novel explores both the privileges of the prosperous and the impairments of the penurious. Although many reviewers are critical of Adiga's work for depicting a very bleak picture of India, yet statistics reveal that economic imbalance has made inroads into the remotest parts of the nation and has become an issue that needs swift redressal. The *White Tiger* follows the story of Balram Halwai, a self-styled entrepreneur who although born into

indigence makes it to the top of the economic ladder by sheer cunning and dexterousness. Rushby points out, “he, along with most lowly Indians, inhabits the Darkness, a place where basic necessities are routinely snatched by the wealthy, who live in the Light” (n.p.). The work is written in an epistolary form and the letters are addressed by the main character [Balram] to the Chinese Premier and chart the narrator’s journey from filth to wealth. Perhaps the most striking aspect of the novel are the vivid details of life in rural as well as urban India that Adiga portrays throughout the story. Balram is brought up in an archetypal Indian village that lacks infrastructure, sanitation, education and public awareness:

Electricity poles—defunct.

Water tap—broken.

Children—too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India (19-20)

While this description enumerates the facets of a typical Indian countryside, the novel also echoes how inequality in rural India leads to maximal dependency on the affluent. The four local landlords [referred to as “animals” in the novel] in the narrator’s native village [Laxmangarh] fleece the villagers and harass them physically and many villagers are thus compelled to seek means of sustenance in towns and cities. The novel offers a striking contrast between the aristocratic privileges the landlords relish at the cost of the local inhabitants and the locals who reel under the burden of acquiring subsistence. Balram narrates:

All the four animals lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh—the landlords’ quarters. They had their own temples inside their mansions, and their own wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed. (25)

Contrarily, the villagers need to beseech the landlords even for menial employment on their fields:

Each year, as soon as it began raining, they would go out to the fields with blackened sickles, begging one landlord or the other for some work. They cast seed, cut weeds, and harvested corn and paddy. (27)

Hence, the rural socio-political system plays a major role in limiting the chances of social mobility for the masses. Additionally, the dearth of academic infrastructure and opportunities for the rural dwellers indicates that they are perpetually doomed. While the landlords send their sons and daughters to Dhanbad and Delhi, on the other hand the villagers are stuck in the cobweb of poverty and meagre resources and can’t even afford a decent education. The only school in the village is in dilapidated condition and the teacher being highly reluctant to teach, the very purpose of the school becomes questionable. Although the narrator proves his efficiency at the school and is promised a scholarship during a school inspection, yet his chances of academic progress are marred by domestic issues. As the family has to arrange a hefty sum as dowry for his cousin-sister’s wedding, he is compelled to drop out of the school and work at a tea shop. This incident represents the perpetual cycle of destitution, dilapidation and poor prospects that the lower strata of the society undergoes. Balram undergoes both humiliation and resentment when he drops out of the school, however another plight befalls him

thereafter. When his father is taken ill, he and his brother ferry him to a government hospital across a river. However, due to absence of the doctor, in turn owing to political apathy, Balram's father succumbs to his disease. The narrator recounts the false entry made in the government ledger after his father's death:

There was no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy, after we bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening. . . . He did not. Around six o'clock that day, as the government ledger no doubt accurately reported, my father was permanently cured of his tuberculosis. (48, 50)

Adiga represents a very true to life picture of the dismal state of healthcare in rural India. The death of the narrator's father due to tuberculosis bespeaks the dearth of quantitative and qualitative availability of medical care for the lower strata of the society as well as the dearth of proper nutrition and safe drinking water. No wonder, India of darkness is depicted as an eternally wretched and hopeless place:

There every morning, tens of thousands of young men sit in the tea shops, reading newspaper, or lie on a charpoy humming a tune. . . . They have no job to do today. They know they won't get any job today. They've given up the fight. (54)

However, Balram has a stroke of luck in Dhanbad as he manages to be the chauffeur for one of the landlord's son who had returned from America lately. His life does takes a better turn in the landlord's household, yet in due course of time he is inflicted with trials and tribulations. The landlord's family ascertains that they are well aware of Balram's family, so that any wrongdoing on part of Balram can be well revenged. The novel therefore points out that the lower class thus becomes stuck in a "rooster coop" (175) as they constantly fear retribution for any act of defiance. Additionally, as Adiga stated in an interview with Arthur J. Pais, the lower class constantly behold the comfort of the affluent and realize that they might be perpetually removed from it and that leads to a rise in their discontentment and eventually leads to mass migrations:

The shameless way wealth is flaunted is extraordinary. Poor people [see] the money the very rich have. Migration of labor is increasing in a big way, especially in North India. Old traditional ties and social structure in the villages and small towns are disappearing, and social unrest and resistance are growing. (n.p)

Balram variously describes the this entrenched bipartite structure that has evolved over time in the country. "These days there are just two castes" says Balram, "Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up" (64). Analogously he refers to them as the "English liquor men" and the "Indian liquor men" (72). Gradually developing cognizance of the pleasures life has to offer to the privileged that the have-nots are constantly deprived of, he eventually develops a strong sense of resentment and [as Adiga terms in the interview]"resistance" towards the system. He also develops apathy towards the privileged owing to their callous attitude towards the underprivileged. "In India" says Balram, "the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants" (68). The novel points out that these servants are deemed as non-entities and are supposed to do every kind of menial job even if they are hired for a specific purpose. Further in the novel, Balram drives Ashok to his native village along with his American wife Pinky. Looking at the village through Balram's

eyes, who has developed a heightened perception of the economic bifurcation over time, the village comes across as an extremely nasty, disorderly and uncivilized place. The plight of Kishan, Balram's elder brother whose body has started waning is emblematic of how the poverty-stricken succumb in the process of acquiring the basic amenities in the "darkness". At the same time, the novel also represents a very bleak picture of the Indian democracy. It is described as a nasty and sold-out affair in the village that further corroborates the issues of the villagers. The work depicts how the poor face the brunt of the undemocratic process of the Indian democracy and become a part of a corrupt process that they hardly have a say in. For instance, Balram recounts how the votes of the young workers in the tea shop he used to work in, including himself, were traded by the teashop owner after falsely registering their age as eighteen:

All of us in the tea shop had to be eighteen, the legal age to vote. There was an election coming up, and the tea shop owner had already sold us. He had sold our fingerprints, . . . he had got a good price for each one of us from the Great Socialist's party. (97)

Additionally, although the politicians assure economic reforms to the poor before the elections, practically the reforms take a back seat once they are in power. The novel explores how because of crony capitalism, reforms for the poor remain a far-fetched dream. "There is no hospital in Laxmangarh" says Balram, "although there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians, before three different elections" (47). While the winning factions only intend to further their own interests, and do little or nothing to improve the condition of the general masses, yet they work hand in glove with the elites in a kind of symbiotic relationship. Quite pertinently, the exposition made by the former RBI governor, Raghuram Rajan, in a speech explicates the crony capitalism prevalent in India:

While the poor do not have the money to 'purchase' public services that are their right, they have a vote that the politician wants. The politician does a little bit to make life a little more tolerable for his poor constituents. . . . The circle is complete. The poor and the under-privileged need the politician to help them get jobs and public services. The crooked politician needs the businessman to provide the funds that allow him to supply patronage to the poor and fight elections. The corrupt businessman needs the crooked politician to get public resources and contracts cheaply. And the politician needs the votes of the poor and the underprivileged. (n.p)

As the novel further evolves, Balram becomes the primary driver of the landlord's family and becomes privy to numerous dealings made by them. He becomes aware of the coal scam that the family is involved in. He drives Ashok, his wife and his brother to Delhi where they intend to bribe the ministers and officials to keep their coal business functional. The work points out that the notion of Delhi as a city that is "the pride of our civic planning" and "the showcase of our republic" (118) has fallen flat as it has failed on both the fronts. The dismal economic divide in Delhi represents how the economic boom in the country has only further filled the coffers of the wealthy. On the one hand, says the narrator "the rich people live in big housing colonies like Defence colony or Greater Kailash or Vasant Kunj . . ." (118), on the other hand "thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from Darkness . . . you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal-like way they live under the huge bridges and

overpasses . . . (119-120). Later in the novel, he strikingly remarks that this condition of pennilessness, homelessness and hopelessness “is not much better than being dead” (314). The novel describes the top-notch life enjoyed by the masters in Delhi and the miserable lives of the drivers which again evokes the fact that the aim of achieving egalitarianism in the country is aberrated. However, the most poignant aspect of the master-slave or alternately the rich-poor relationship is the exploitation of the latter by the former without humane considerations or any remorse. In the novel the most staggering exploitation of the narrator takes place when he becomes the scape goat and is most likely to be booked for the car accident committed by Pinkyin a state of insobriety resulting in death of a vagrant. Such incidents are depicted as a quotidian affair in India wherein even the law doesn’t take its course:

The jails in Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind the bars . . . taking the blame . . . We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul . . . The judges? Wouldn’t they see through this obviously forced confession? But they are in the racket too. They take their bribe, they ignore discrepancies in the case. And life goes on. (169)

This gruesome incident nevertheless changes the narrator from a docile servant to an inward-looking thinking machine. Additionally, the change that he notices in Ashok in Delhi further augments his grudge. The eventual transformation of Ashok from a seemingly American educated man who is capable of sympathy and empathy to an unethical person and indifferent master in Delhi is evident by the time Balram murders him. Although Ashok comes across as a gracious person compared to his family for most part of the narrative, and Balram holds him in reverence despite his flaws [even towards the end of the novel], yet when Ashok and his brother reproach him for donating a rupee, his admiration for Ashok undergoes a sea change:

That was when it struck me that there really was no difference between the two of them. They were both their father’s seed. (242)

While the family bribes the ministers and their attendants substantially, their censorious attitude towards the underprivileged comes across vividly in the novel. It can conclusively be said that the mishandling that the narrator undergoes and beholds as a destitute propels him towards committing the inhumane act of murder. When Balram flees with the cash and becomes an entrepreneur in Bangalore, he maintains a distance with his employees, however, he resolutely avoids the misdeeds that his masters committed with him. “I don’t treat them like servants” says the narrator, “I don’t slap, or bully, or mock anyone” (302). The novel can thus be deemed to be a keen case study of the economic inequality in India and the failure of liberal economic reforms and calls for prompt addressal of the economic ills plaguing the nation as they grossly impact the quotidian life of the downtrodden. Adiga stated in an interview:

The truth is, India doesn't need the world's help in fixing its poverty. The money is present right here, the social workers are right here. The basic steps needed to lift the 400 million Indians who live in extreme poverty are known to everyone – a massive increase in government investment in primary schools, hospitals, and farming (most of the poor live in villages). What is lacking in India is the political will to make these investments –

and to fight the pervasive corruption that erodes the effectiveness of the meager anti-poverty programmes currently in place.

Conclusion:

In the novel, Adiga overtly represents the ghastly forces that constantly subdue the lower class, however there is a glimmer of hope in the novel as well. For instance, the narrator refers to the technological potential of the country and states that “we . . . have set up all the outsourcing companies that virtually run America now” (4) and reposes hope in the notion that “the future of the world lies with the yellow man [the Chinese] and the brown man [the Indians] (5). It’s this optimism that needs to be worked upon and means worked out so that the underprivileged can also eventually live a life worth living.

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