MORAL AMBIGUITY AND REPRESENTATIONS OF NEW INDIA IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S „THE WHITE TIGER" (2008)

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Abstract: "The White Tiger" (2008) is a critically acclaimed novel written by an up-and-coming talented writer that provides a completely new and different perspective of contemporary society as well as the new development in India. In this paper I try to highlight the fact that one of the main concerns of this book is to show how the abrupt changes in the contemporary world have influenced India's traditional society. The negative effects that contemporary changes have had on present day Indian society are presented in this study. Also, I analyse the book as a warning against focusing exclusively on economic development and prosperity while neglecting spiritual and moral values. I argue that the protagonist's fluid approach to morality is prompted by the realities of contemporary Indian society. The conclusion is that ultimately, the portrait of present-day Indian society is bleak and hopeless.

Keywords: modernity, tradition, ambiguity, fluidity, morality.

1.Introduction

"*The White Tiger*" is a critically acclaimed novel written by an up-and-coming talented writer which provides a completely new and different perspective of contemporary society as well as the new development in India. Adiga studied English Literature at Columbia University, New York and went on to obtain his M. Phil. At Magdalen College, Oxford (4) The novel was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in the year it was published, thus proving its value and innovative perspective (3).

The book is the story of an ordinary Indian man belonging to the poor class who ascends to the top layers of the society by using questionable methods. It is a first-person narrative in which Balram Halwai tells the story of his becoming a successful entrepreneur in a letter written to Premier Wen Jiabao of China who was expected to visit Bangalore. The story is meant to teach Premier Jiabao about the values of contemporary Indian entrepreneurship.

2.A shockingly brutal chain of events

Thus, we find out that Balram was born in the village of Laxmangarh, district of Gaya. He was the son of a humble rickshaw puller, Vikram, though he belonged to the caste of sweet makers – Halway. As a young boy he was smarter than the other children and impressed his teachers which led to his father's insistence that he attend school in order to learn to read and write. Unfortunately, after his parents' death the family is left in the care of his grandmother – Kusum - who forces him to drop out of school in order to work in the teashop and earn money for the family. Still, some memories of the school years stay with him, especially the one in which he recalls how he got a book called "*Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*" as a gift from the school inspector who praised his intelligence, honesty and vivacity.

"*You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?'*
I thought about it and said:
'The white tiger.'
'That's what you are, in this jungle.'" (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 35)

It is a conversation that will haunt him for the rest of his life and one that plants the seeds for his subsequent actions. While working in the teashop, Balram overhears a conversation about well-paid drivers and desperately urges the matriarch of the family – grandmother Kusum – to pay for his driving lessons.

Kusum agrees and this is leads to a different turn of his existence, A chain of events that will eventually change his life and morals. After completing his driving lessons, he gets a job as he the second driver of a well-off family in the city of Dhanbad. While working for the family, he gets a taste of what life is like for the rich and immediately starts to covet all that. His true lack of morality is revealed now as he does not hesitate to expose the first driver – Ram Persad – as a Muslim in order to be able to leave to Delhi and work as a driver for one of the rich man's sons – Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam.

Delhi proves to be a whole new world for him, a crazy city so different from everything he had encountered before. Mr. Ashok and his wife get an apartment in Gurgaon, the most American part of the city with Balram living in the basement, in a small cell. The city makes him change his appearance – he buys toothpaste, a white T-shirt and black shoes – in order to avoid being mocked by the rest of the drivers and his masters. However, what is most relevant, is his morality that is subject to accelerating degradation during his stay in the city. The change is prompted by everything that he witnesses in the city as well as by the events that he is part of. One such event is the car accident with the drunk Pinky Madam driving and running over a beggar, probably. Balram is forced to sign a statement saying that he was the one driving, basically taking the blame for his master's wife. The other events are the constant actions of the two rich brothers, Mr. Ashok and Mukesh Sir (the Mongoose), whom he drives around in the city with bags full of bribe money intended for ministers and all sorts of bureaucrats who were expected to arrange for them to be allowed to exploit coal from government mines.

All these lead to him having contrasting urges with the murder plan ultimately looming in his mind. He clearly sets out the pros and cons of his future actions, wonders through Delhi's districts – the rich ones, the slums, goes to the zoo and the second-hand book market. It must be mentioned that Balram is no longer alone, as his grandmother had sent his little nephew Dharam to him forcing him to care of the boy and make sure he becomes a driver. This was part of the payback that he owed to his family for initially paying for his driving lessons. It is something that makes Balram feel even more trapped – part of The Great Indian Rooster Coop. During the visit at the National Zoo as the stares into the eyes with The White Tiger, he faints. This is actually the tipping point that makes Balram understand that he must change his existence at whatever cost. He asks Dharam to write a letter to Kusum Granny telling her what happened at the Zoo. By this point his decision had already been made. The next morning, Balram drives the car in the rainy weather, pretends is has a tyre problem, makes his master Mr. Ashok come out to check it out and hits him on the head with a broken glass. To make sure Ashok is dead, Balram turns his face up and slits his throat. He drags the body into the bushes, changes into the white T-shirt, gets the bag full of bribe money and goes back to his nephew Dharam. He flees by tarin moving in zigzag in order to avoid being caught until finally reaching Bangalore four weeks later.

Following his arrival in Bangalore, Balram decides to put the bribe money to good use. This is when the murderer turns into a business entrepreneur. He goes to a Toyota Qualis dealer and tells him he wants to rents all of its cars, bribes a police officer to take out of business one taxi company and starts his own business – taxis picking up and dropping off employees at night time, especially those who worked for multinational call centres. His new name is Ashok Sharma and he manages "*The White Tiger Drivers Company*". Soon he becomes quite rich and he is able to afford a lot of things that he had only dreamt of before.

He is aware, though, that by breaking free and committing murder he had sacrificed his family. He learns from a newspaper story that all of his seventeen family members had been killed as an act of revenge for what he had done. He tries to atone for his sins – he sends Dharam to an English school, plans on setting up a school for poor children, shows empathy towards his drivers, even helps the family of a boy that one of his drivers had killed. Nevertheless, he cannot bring himself to admit that he had made a mistake because for him anything was worth it to know just for a day or an hour what it feels like not to be a servant.

3.The Ills of the New India

One of Adiga's main concerns in this novel is to show how the abrupt changes in the contemporary world have influenced India's traditional society. As the authors of "*The Empire Writes Back"* have so eloquently put it, this novel too is concerned with "*the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this…"* (Ashcroft et al. 2)

From the second half of the 20th century onwards, India has gone through many significant changes – first, there was the independence from the British empire in 1947, then the Partition and then globalization. Early in the novel, Balram familiarizes the reader with the traditional caste system in India and the way in which globalization has disrupted that, not in a good nut in a bad way. Readers find out that Balram Halwai's family were traditional sweet makers who were forced to adopt a new role, that of rickshaw puller, because of poverty. The change in economic reality has had a major impact on both the rural and the urban India. Balram uses the phrase '*New India* ', to refer the way in which everything has become different in contemporary times.

There is a stark conflict between modernity and tradition and Adiga highlights the negative effects that contemporary changes have had on both the rich and the poor. He does that with a lot of humour and irony at times. It is widely accepted, for example, that the modern Indian state was founded on the peaceful actions and moral principles set out by Mahatma Gandhi. However, Balram finds that the book that he is gifted by the school inspector entitled "*Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*" is of no use to him in the New India. In a similar manner, while working as a driver in Delhi and driving his employers to various locations where they bribe officials, Balram constantly passes by huge billboards that display Gandhi's image and quotes. Yet, nobody seems to act in accordance with the endeared teachings of the nation's spiritual guide.

Adiga is very critical of the new India that he believes has been built on corruption, bribes and the usurpation of moral values. For instance, Balram's direct chief, Mr. Ashok, is the son of a rich man who was educated in the United States and has come back to India apparently with a new mindset and liberal views. He ignored the family opposition and married Pinky Madam in American. Back to India, the couple attitude seems to be in stark contrast with the way in which contemporary India functions. However, their opposition remains at a verbal level while their actions prove the contrary – they have succumbed to the way in which everything is conducted in the new India. They bemoan the corruption and the injustices that prevail in contemporary India while being part of the system themselves. They

offer bribe money to government officials, try to influence the elections result, make Balram take the blame for a deadly car accident and scold him when he offers money to a street beggar. It is precisely this hypocrisy that sickens Balram and drives him to the decision of murdering Mr. Ashok. The latter's ideas remain at a theoretical level, they lack the complexity and practicality that would lead to their being enacted. As Balram notices,

> *"…I realized that this tall, broad-shouldered, handsome, foreign-educated man. Who would be my only master in a few minutes, when the long whistle blew and this train headed off towards Dhanbad, was weak, helpless, absentminded, and completely unprotected by the usual instincts that run in the blood of a landlord.*
> *If you were back in Laxmangarah, we would have called you, the lamb."* (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 142)

Both Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam represent feeble impulses to change India who ultimately end up being swallowed by the system and becoming an integral part of it. In particular, Pinky Madam goes one step further as not only does she despise the corrupt world of India and the poverty that pervades in the country but also its traditions and customs, chief among which the caste system and traditional marriage. Also, their wealth is the result of questionable practices that stand for everything that is wrong in the country.

Contemporary India is revealed to readers as a space of deep contradictions with the poor having retained their marginal status and the rich who continue to build their wealth by using fraudulent methods and exploiting the other half of the nation. In the middle we have the middle class whose status has really been change by globalization with the setting up of Western businesses in the country. Sadly, though, these amount to a very small number.

4. Moral Fluidity or Moral Degradation?

What transpires through the pages of this book is that Adiga has written it as a critique of and a warning against focusing exclusively on economic development and prosperity while neglecting spiritual and moral values. The protagonist, Balram Halwai is a self-made man who builds his success on morally ambiguous action. But it is clear that Adiga sympathizes with his protagonist and does not lay all the blame on him. Actually, it is the traditional practices deeply embedded in contemporary Indian society that the author examines critically. Even if, theoretically speaking, the traditional caste system was abolished after India gained independence from the British Empire in 1947, the practice still endures especially in rural areas. This segregation of society locks people within particular social layers. Individuals are not allowed any social mobility irrespective of how talented, intelligent or hard-working they are.

"*That was when it hit me – in a way it never had before – how the rich always get the best things in life, and all that we get is their leftovers.*" (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 233)

This practice enrages Balram who metaphorically compares pre-independence India to a very well-organized zoo where all animals had their predestined, well-defined places. However, even if Indian society seems to have moved beyond the caste system in the post-independence era, what followed is actually equally bad. The zoo has turned into a jungle – the animals have been set free and instincts are showing their hideous face every single day. In contemporary India, most people behave like animals with total indifference to human suffering and instead of helping each other, they destroy one another. Throughout the novel many characters are given animals names precisely because of the above-mentioned reason. Thus, Balram is the White Tiger, a name given to him by the school inspector because he is so much smarter than the other children; he calls his old employer the Stork because of the

latter's long legs while his employer's junior son gets to be called the Mongoose because of his cunning nature.

The comparison with the animal realm goes even further when Balram creates the metaphor of the Rooser Coop which stand for the traditional Indian society harboring the poor. Brooding over this idea he wonders:

> "*Why does the Rooster Coop work? How does it trap so many millions of men and women so effectively?*
> *Secondly, can a man break out of the coop? What is one day, for instance, a driver took his employer's money and ran? What would his life be like?"* (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 176)

Later on, he provides the answer to the two previous questions:

> "*The answer to the first question is that the pride and glory of our nation, the repository of all our love and sacrifice, the subject of no doubt considerable space in the pamphlet that the prime minister will hand over to you, the Indian family is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop."* (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 176)

Therefore, the system has been perfected throughout the ages and it is so pervasive that nobody can escape it. If you desire to move up the social ladder and defy the existence that has been set out for you, everyone in the family will pay this audacity. So, can individuals ever break out of this this? Balram continues with the answer to the second question:

> "*The answer to the second question is that only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed – hunted, beaten and burned alive by the masters – can break out of the coop. That would take no normal being, but a freak, a pervert of nature.*
> *It would, in fact, take a White Tiger.*" (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 177)

Thus, Balram internalizes the idea that he has what it takes to break all the barriers and get out of the Rooster Coop. he is the White Tiger, the creature that comes along only once in a generation, that is smarter, stronger, more resourceful and more ambitious than the rest. He does realize that those who want to break out of the Rooster Coop must be ready to sacrifice everything that traditional culture presents as valuable in life – family, friends, love and last but not least moral values. At the same time, he realizes that one can only be truly independent if one gives up all of these things which he has come to perceive as liabilities, elements that make individuals lose their strength and become vulnerable. Balram is convinced that he is the White Tiger – a creature that has no weaknesses and can only live freely. For Balram, the injustices in the outer world are the ones that force him to act in the way he did – commit murder, steal and cheat.

In fact, this where all of his strength comes from – the firm belief that he has not acted in a faulty manner. He sees the world as divided between two categories – the rich and the poor and the only way to move from one to the other is to give up any attachment to traditional ides. Hence, Balram's fluid approach to morality. In all of his letters, Balram depicts India as a country where success requires cheating, corruption and bribery for both the rich and the poor. So, why bother? Why worry over such matters? Flexibility, detachment and the ability to adapt to various situations are qualities required in a successful entrepreneur such as himself. Throughout the book he argues that the only way to achieve success is to show complete disregard for morals and rules, be they official or not.

Readers might be puzzled by the ease and lack of remorse with which Balram tells the story of his crimes at times even priding himself on these exploits, but he is deeply convinced that he has chosen the only path available to people like him, born poor and with no opportunities but endowed with intelligence and great ambitions to surpass their humble condition. To prove this, the end of the book presents a not so vile protagonist who has dreams of making the world better, of course after having climbed up the social ladder himself.

> "*After three or four years in the real estate, I think 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. A school full of White Tigers unleased on Bangalore!"* (Adiga, *"The White Tiger*", 319)

The slave turned master, the boy with no name called just Munna, meaning '*boy*', by family members, subsequently given the name Balram by the school inspector and finally adopting his former master's name – Ashok Sharma ultimately proves a slight touch of humanity in his thoughts and actions. Each name represents a stage in his fluid identity – the poor boy with no chances in life, the ambitious young man willing to defy rules and break with everything sacred in human existence in order to succeed and the accomplished entrepreneur who feels compelled to give something back to the likes of him as a young boy. The concept of identity itself is seen from a postmodern perspective:

> *"What is transformed in the postmodern perspective is not simply the image of the person, but an interrogation of the discursive and disciplinary place from which questions of identity are strategically and institutionally posed."* (Bhabha, "*Interrogating Identity: The Postcolonial Perspective*" in Du Gay et. al, 96)

Despite the redeeming quality of the protagonist's last thoughts, the depiction of contemporary Indian society from this novel is essentially dark and hopeless.

5. Conclusions

Adiga's exploration of the new India is surprising and revealing at the same time. While readers might expect to encounter praise for the progress that the country has made following its independence from the British Empire of 1947, they are witnesses of a genuine critical view of the path that India is on during the globalization era. Retention of some rigid, traditional views from the past, coupled with the degradation of moral values and an excessive thirst for material wealth, have turned humans into beasts.

As a global economy, contemporary India has become a jungle where all try to survive and prosper while there seems to be a reasonable justification for any kind of practice no matter how vile and cruel it might be. Redemption is no longer needed.

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