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IDENTIFYING STRUGGLES AND SOCIAL INJUSTICES IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT:

Contemporary India is being portrayed as rapidly growing economy, and it is well-known that to everything there is a cost attached. So, a conscious question arises: India is rapidly growing economically, but, at what cost? Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger brings out a story from India in the 2000s, through the story of Balram Halwai, the protagonist of The White Tiger, Adigaexposes the costs behind India's economic progress. He criticizes the persistent struggles and deep-rooted social injustices concealed behind the rapid development. Through the first-person narration of the protagonist, Adiga serves harsh realities, such as poverty, cast discrimination, exploitation, lesser educational opportunities, unemployment, child labor, poor healthcare, and many others that the underprivileged have to endure on a daily basis. In the novel, Balram makes the readers aware how India is not one, but two countries – India of light and India of darkness, where the rich and the poor live respectively. In our nation, meritocracy is nothing but mere illusion, because opportunities are not determined by merit rather it is decided by whether you are born in a rich family or a poor one. Balram transcends from being a poor village boy working at a tea-stall, to become an entrepreneur in the high-end city of Bangalore, for this he crosses many moral and legal boundaries. Balram's journey demonstrates how systemic inequality, corruption, and oppression based on class and caste force people to do illegal things. Through various literary devices, such as irony, satire, symbolism, etc. Adiga, brings forward shortcomings of our democratic nation. Through his novel, Adiga shatters India's image of an economically developing nation, as economic liberalization in India makes the rich richer, while millions struggle under social exclusion and exploitation. This paper is set to examine critically the various forms of struggles and social injustices represented in The White Tiger. The study also highlights Adiga's contributions to contemporary English literature by voicing the marginalized, and bringing forward the other side development.

KEYWORDS:

STRUGGLE, SOCIAL INJUSTICE, POVERTY, CASTE-DISCRIMINATION, CLASS DIVIDE, CORRUPTION, MORAL DILEMMA, SOCIAL MOBILITY, EXPLOITATION.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature, since ever, been serving as a mirror to the society. It functions not only as a source of entertainment for the readers but also exposes them to the social, political, economic, and cultural conditions prevailing at the time. It gives an idea of traditions, beliefs and hence history of the society. Writers often use fiction as a tool to make people aware of true conditions of the society, often addressing struggles of marginalized communities, discrimination against women, discrimination based on caste, class gap, etc. to question the oppressive social structures, they inspire readers to develop critical thinking allowing them to analyze the problem and giving them power to differentiate between what is right and what is not. The White Tiger is one such thought provoking novel.

Published in 2008, The White Tiger is Aravind Adiga's debut novel. He received widespread appreciation worldwide for the storyline and the deep meanings. Also, the novel won The Man Booker prize in the same year, making Adiga the fifth Indian writer to receive the award after V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai.

Aravind Adiga occupies a significant position among contemporary English literature novelist. He is often criticized for his unflinching portrayals of India's social, economic, and political realities. But the ground reality speaks nothing different. His works constantly question India's image of a rapidly developing economy by exposing the lives of people who remain excluded from the benefits. The White Tiger is one of the most influential novels which represents poverty, exploitation, class and caste-based discrimination, corruption, social inequality post-independence.

The White Tiger contains auto biographical narration of

Balram Halwai, a boy born in a poor family in the village Laxmangarh. Balram writes a series letters to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jia Bao, through which he narrates the story of his life. He reveals how he went from being a poor village boy, to a child labor, to a taxi driver, then to a private chauffer, and finally to a successful entrepreneur based in Bangalore. Also, he shares his thoughts and ideas on various aspects of life.

The novel brings into picture every day hardships faced by millions of economically less privileged Indians through Balram's life story. Through Balram's life we learn how poverty is not merely lack of money, rather it implies lack of education, freedom, personal development, and dignity.

The White Tiger was written at a time when India was undergoing rapid globalization and urbanization, which suggests huge employment opportunities, better income and hence a better life. But it does not happen so, because majority of the money goes in the pockets of the people possessing the authority, such as politicians, businessmen, government officials, etc. and just a little remains for the people who really do the job.

Economic inequality and class exploitations are main themes of the novel while class discrimination, child labor, poverty, caste discrimination, corruption, inequality, lack of proper education and healthcare are others.

MAJOR STRUGGLES AND SOCIAL INJUSTICES

POVERTY AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

When we hear that a country is growing economically, automatically there is an image in our minds that, it is benefiting for all citizens, more for some less for others. Globalization and liberalization project an idea of better life conditions for all, but this idea turns into myth as soon as lives of various classes are analyzed through an unbiased lens. Both globalization and liberalization are economically benefitting only for the rich while the poor keeps struggling even for basic amenities such as food, shelter, clothing, healthcare and education. Poverty and economic disparity in The White Tiger are harsh. Devastating effects of poverty is observed when, in childhood Balram has to drop out of school and work at a tea stall to support his family financially. Though he was brilliant at studies and his school inspector had given him the name 'white tiger', which suggests he was a rare and intelligent student when compared to his batch mates. Even this couldn't help him keep up with his education. Through The White Tiger, we get to learn how poverty is not merely absence of wealth, but it is lack of opportunities, compelling individuals to small jobs due to responsibility and daily life needs. Balram later starts working as a driver due to lack of money. Balram was born in a small village, where most of the people were dependent on agriculture for livelihood and are continuously trapped in debt and poverty. Wealth and, hence power are entrusted in the hands of landlords. Villagers are forced to perform labor-intense chores which earn them petty amount of money, while the landlords make money out of pre-existing money, easily and lead lavish lives. This exploitation of labor, despite their hardwork made them economically vulnerable and socially inferior.

Globalization has evidently created new economic opportunities but it failed in erasing structural inequality which is deeply ingrained through generations.

CLASS DIVIDE AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

Class divide and social hierarchy is one of the main themes of the novel. In his series of letter to the Chinese premier, Wen JiaBao, on the sixth night, Balram mentions that India is not one country, but two- India of light and India of Darkness.

India of light can be visualized as the wealthy, urban, and powerful population of the society. Such as Balram's ex-employer Mr. Ashoke and his wife Pinky madam. They live in elite apartments, own luxury cars, dine in expensive restaurants and spend lavishly on entertainment.

On the other hand, India of Darkness in his letter symbolizes the poor, oppressed and marginalized sections of society, such as Balram and his family, who lack even the basic means to livelihood. They are denied basic rights. Education which, in contemporary India, is often viewed as a means for upward mobility and a promise for better living conditions, is also unequal and inaccessible. Individuals are prevented from rising above their circumstances, even though talented and hard-working.

CASTE BASED DISCRIMINATION

Though invisible, caste acts as one of the most powerful modes of oppression in India. Though, caste discrimination is not the main theme, but it significantly influences lives of Balram and other people, especially those belonging to lower castes. Also, it influences opportunities and identities of individuals negatively.

From his name Balram Halwai itself, it can be made out that Balram belongs to the Halwai caste. Halwai translates to 'sweet-makers' in English. Traditionally the surname is inherited from one generation to the next. So, it becomes part of identity. On top of that he himself introduces self as "My name is Balram Halwai. Halwai means sweet-maker". This shows how he associates himself immediately to his caste. In India a person's surname often determines social status and occupation, which is inherited usually from their father, in patriarchy.

This demonstrates that occupations are inherited and not chosen through interest or merit. People from lower caste are expected to serve people occupying higher strata in society forever. Like Balram's father was a rikshaw-puller, Balram becamea driver, and would be doing the same until death and then his children would be doing the same after him, if he had not taken the responsibility to change the course of his life in his own hands.

CHILD LABOR

Though child labor is not central theme of the novel, but it is one of the significant social injustices in the novel. It is portrayed as consequence of poverty, economic inequality, caste oppression, and lack of education, when Balram starts working at a tea stall. From Balram's narration we get to know how he and other children were forced into labor for petty amount of money. His family cannot afford to keep him in school, which forces him to quit schooling midway. Though he was identified as a rare and intelligent student, this could not keep him in school.

COLLAPSED EDUCATION SYSTEM

Education system in The White Tiger is are presentation of huge institutional failure. It is expected that at least basic education should be available for all. Adiga demonstrates how effective and meaningful education is limited only to the privileged masses.

Education is often viewed as a ladder for upward mobility and an aid to understand the world better. Inequality in education is like setting different starting lines for a race. Where the wealthy lot will already be ahead of you if you are not born in a financially privileged background.

There is stark difference between urban and rural education. Rich kids have access to private English-medium schools, modern technologies and well-trained educators. While poor children like Balram, have no other options except for ill-maintained government schools with not enough facilities, because government schools are inexpensive, while private schools charge hefty amount.

Balram mentions about widespread corruption within educational system. In government schools, government suffice funds for schools, uniforms, meals, uniforms, amenities, salaries for the staffs, etc. even after the provided funds are sufficient for all facilities, these schools drastically lack in even the basic necessities because the funds are stolen by officials and teachers. Teachers do not comply to their teaching duties and children hardly receive any education. Wasting both resources and man power. The biggest failure of educational system is seen when talented students such as Balram drop out, and the system does not even notice.

EXPLOITATIONS BY LANDLORDS

Exploitation by landlords has been a continuous form of social injustice ever since the time when India was under British rule. Feudal authority and class difference sallow landlords to exploit the workers. Furthermore, as workers are not literate or skilled enough to work elsewhere and are dependent on the job for money to afford basic things for themselves and their family.

There is a mention of four powerful land-lords that control Balram's village Laxmangarh, the Stork, the Raven, the Buffalo, and the Wild Boar who are the owners of vast majority of lands and exercise their control over the entire village. Animal names point to the animal-like traits such as greed, violence, exploitation, etc. which they possess. They lack human-like characters such as compassion and kindness.

They extract large amounts from the farmers' earnings as rent. Though villagers cultivated the lands but cannot really relish the products they sowed with their hands.

CORRUPTION

The theme of corruption lies at heart of the novel. Behind every facility that does not meet expectations, is corruption. Corruption slowly engulfs education, law, business, healthcare, infrastructure, and hence everyday life of citizens. It is deeply embedded in the social structures. In the novel, politicians are greedy and dishonest. They make false promises during elections and change as soon as they are elected. Funds issued to them for welfare of public are used by them for their personal interest. They mislead the citizens just for votes. Most politicians start their political journey from being common men. But as soon as they gain power they become like others ignoring common people's need.

Police and government officials are no different. They are easily influenced by money and power. Successful business in the novel is built on foundation of corrupt system. Businessmen are supposed to pay officials for permits, licenses, contracts etc. After becoming businessman in Bangalore, Balram himself, admits to paying bribes to officials and police regularly in order to smoothly run his taxi business.

DEGRADED HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

Adiga presents a cold picture of healthcare in The White Tiger, where the poor under privileged people are denied basic human right of healthcare in a democracy, it is depicted as a privilege reserved only for the rich. It is so ironic that people in a democracy are denied of basic medical facilities. Especially the poor who cannot afford to pay high fees to private hospitals. Balram's village, Laxmangarh, lacks proper hospitals, medical facilities and well-trained medical staffs. When Balram's father suffers illness due to tuberculosis, his family had no other options but to take him to government hospital, where he did not receive proper medical treatment. And he dies. And this tragic incident breaks their family further, because his father was the bread earner.

EXPLOITATION OF DOMESTIC SERVANTS

Balram serves as driver to Mr. Ashok and his wife, Pinky madam. Ashok is son of a rich landlord of Laxmangarh. Later Ashok and Pinky move to Delhi, Balram moves with them too. There he gets exposure to the high-class lives of privileged people. From the very beginning Balram has been curios, he does not blindly accept whatever is imposed on him. He begins to compare their lives, habits, facilities with his. Which were starkly different.

Initially Balram views the job as an opportunity for upward mobility. But he soon realizes it is not true, as he was expected to be available all the time leaving him with no personal life that too just for a petty amount of money. His poor living standards reminded him every second of

his inferiority. Besides driving he was forced to do household chores as and when directed by Pinky madam.

One of the most striking incidents is when pinky madam kills a child with her car, under the influence of alcohol, and Balram is asked to take the blame on himself. This shows how rich people use their servants as escape-goats to save their reputation and escape from punishment.

Balram's journey reveals how domestic workers are subjected to social, economic, and psychological exploitations by their rich employers. The novel presents clear-cut picture that master-servant relationship is not built on mutual grounds. It is just fear and dependence of the servant that keeps him in the job.

MORAL CORRUPTION AND CRIME AS MEANS FOR UPWARD MOBILITY

The White Tiger shows how Balram's upward mobility is not a result of equal opportunities and quality education rather it is product of moral compromise and violence. Adiga has presented this act of protagonist not as a choice but as consequence of social injustice and inequality which is deeply ingrained in contemporary Indian society.

Just imagine what would have happened if Balram would not have murdered Ashok? He would have to serve Ashok or others may beforever. He would have to endure the same painful life, where despite tremendous hard work, he would earn petty amount not sufficient even for his necessities. He would have to bear every day abuse. Every day his dignity would be hampered.

In such conditions crime and immoral paths become the only way to get out of this congested social system. In this way novel challenges conventional ideas of blind morality.

INDIA OF DARKNESS'S. INDIA OF LIGHT

Adiga divides India into two symbolic regions- India of Darkness and India of Light, symbolizing the deep inequalities within a country. The metaphor – 'India of Darkness and India of Light 'point to unequal distributions of wealth, opportunities, facilities, power, and similarly every means to live a comfortable life. Where India of Darkness represents rural regions, slums, etc. which lack even in basic facilities such as proper education, healthcare, food shelter, clothing. The 'India of Darkness' lacks employment and is hence is characterized by poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment, making them more prone to exploitation.

'India of Light' represents high end cities which advance in technologies and facilities, such as Bangalore, Mumbai, Delhi, Gurgaon, Noida etc. They are full of opportunities in every sector, whether education, jobs, everything. They have schools with modern technologies, proper hospitals with good doctors, better opportunities for businesses, and many more. Globalization and liberalization gave rise to capitalism, that own businesses and hence have a hold on the entire country.

SERVITUDE AND THE METAPHOR OF ROOSTER COOP

The metaphor of Rooster Coop symbolizes psychological servitude. It explains how exploitation occurs despite person possessing its awareness. Servants remain loyal to their masters because of fear and financial dependence.

Rooster coop refers to metal cages in which roosters are kept imprisoned before being slaughtered in Delhi. While in the coop, they see others like them being slaughtered but they do not try hard enough to escape, even after knowing their fate.

Balram compares the roostersto servants and people working on lower positions, who despite knowing their fate, continue the same job.

BALRAM AS SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

Balram emerges as the ultimate symbol of resistance and social mobility in the novel. He is born in an extremely poor family, and it was but obvious that he would spend his life as servant. The background in which he was born, hardly left any room for upward mobility. Neither did he had resources nor education to climb the ladder. But he is not like others, he is "the white tiger" unique and distinct from others, so he does not quietly accept their fate. He questions the social hierarchy and refuses to remain trapped in what he calls as the rooster coop-a metaphor for the psychological and social conditioning that keeps the poor obedient to the rich. He is very curious about social structures. And with every passing day he becomes more and more aware about exploitation and injustice which transforms him into a rebel.All frustration piles up in him, then one day he murders his employer, Mr. Ashok. On a rainy day, he was driving Ashok, who had with him a large bag of bribed cash. Balram fabricates a mechanical issue with the car. And when Ashok steps out to examine the wheels, Balram slits his throat with a broken whisky bottle. Then he steals the money and escapes to Bangalore. This murder was a result of the deep-seated resilience and undying urge to escape the oppressive, servant class. In Bangalore he uses the stolen money to bribe the officials in order to successfully establish his taxi business, transforming from servant to entrepreneur.

CONCLUSION

Through The White Tiger, Aravind Adiga presents a bleak picture of socio-economic conditions prevailing in India in the 2000s.Globalization and liberalization were in full bloom, which influenced the narrative of India's economic growth. The White Tiger uncovers the harsh realities behind nation's economic advancements. He reveals, despite working extremely hard, millions of individuals find it difficult to afford basic food, shelter, clothing, education, and healthcare for themselves and their family.

It is often announced proudly that our country is progressing, and soon going to be 'Vishwaguru' which translates to 'World Leader' in English. It sounds extremely weird and utterly impossible, because till date,

all facilities and opportunities are reserved only for the rich. There are still villages which lack proper schools, hospitals, literacy, the people there work as daily wagers just to feed their family. Still, there are overly crowded slums where people suffer inadequate living spaces, lack clean drinking water and basic hygiene. Is it possible for a country with hunger, poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, poor healthcare, ignored sanitation, caste and gender-based discrimination, corruption, moral corruption, and many more socio-political issues become a world leader?

Through Balram's story Adiga shows the struggles and social injustices that an individual trapped within oppressive social structures. Balram's life full of struggles show how struggles are interlinked, one giving birth to the next and so on, keeping person entangled in the cob.

Instead of expressing poverty, child labor, exploitation, corruption, unequal opportunities, lack of education, denial of basic rights, etc. as separate problems Adiga shows how there operates a system which is designed to protect the privileges of the powerful while keeping the poor under the same tormenting conditions.

Published in 2008, which is post-independence India, The White Tiger brings out failures of India as a democratic nation. Democracy is defined as citizens electing government to govern on their behalf but, there are merely any reforms in favor of the citizens. During elections there are numerous promises which vanish as soon as results are declared. The saddest part of the novel is how no one cares about the sufferers, not even the administration or the government which was elected by them.

Balram's transformation is not through merit or opportunity rather it is through desperate urge to get out of poverty and misery, for which he compromises morally many-a-times and uses violence. Through Balram's unconventional rise Adiga shows upward mobility is difficult but not impossible even for people belonging to the lowest strata.

Through his novel, Adiga suggests that there is an urgent need for institutional and socio-political reforms in India.

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