Chapter 5

Darkness, Light and Beyond: Reading

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*

Introduction

“The stakes are very high in Asia, . . . Things are shifting eastward. . . .”, thinks Derek Ting, the star and writer of the 2012 film *Supercapitalist* (Freeland unnumbered). Though he is an American of Asian origin, he goes back to his ancestor’s homeland in order to seek better fortune. To him, Hong Kong is a “make-it-happen town” with all the glamour of city life such as discos, ballrooms, shipping yards, casinos, bars, and pubs filled with call-girls. The film captures “a glimpse of some of the tastes, colours and flavours of this rising China” and shows how the American dream that a great number of people from most countries and nationalities run after is shattered with the emergence of economic powers in Asia (ibid.). It particularly centres on the fluidity of national identity in the age of global capitalism by showing that Conner Lee (played by Derek Ting), the protagonist of the film, who leads a global life is, in fact, emerging as a global citizen. The Booker winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) offers such a character Ashok Sharma, an Indian-American who along with his wife comes back to India in search of a “make-it-happen city” as India is on the verge of emerging as an economic superpower.
Balram Halwai, a chauffeur-turned entrepreneur in the same novel observes that the future of the world lies in the hands of yellow and brown people from Asia as white Americans waste their energy by buggering, using cell-phones etc. Nevertheless, when Balram reveals the secrets of India shining and Mr. Ashok experiences the “other” India firsthand, the myth of India or the East shining goes beyond reach and Ashok’s Indian dream disappears in the “darkness”.

The Oscar winning Bollywood film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) presents a character Jamal Malik from the “other” India who finds his fortunes by winning the grand prize of the television game show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (Who will become a Millionaire?), an Indian version of the UK game show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* He answers the questions not through formal education, but through experiences and practical knowledge learnt from struggles of life, from the streets, and from the reality of living and surviving in the “other” India. His overwhelming inquisitiveness and latent talent suppressed by the system of capitalist society are evident in Balram who also learns from the streets, from life, from the air, from his surroundings, and remains a perpetual eavesdropper. Though the film has received mixed criticism and debates as it does not show the shining and glamorous India that other Bollywood movies tend to depict, Jamal, the protagonist of the film, must be popular among thousands of tea-boys and underprivileged Indian youth. Balram was forced to drop school very early to become a tea-boy as the poor, according to him, are deprived of education in rural India. He describes through his extraordinary narrative skill that when the small malnourished pale young bodies move from table to table in the tea stall, serving and cleaning, they look like nothing but human spiders. Later in Delhi working as a driver Balram can find the half-baked fate-
driven folks of the Darkness—human spiders moving in an innumerable number in the lanes and lawns of Delhi. *Slumdog Millionaire* juxtaposes, among others, two sides of India: one having technologically developed cultures and capitals like call-centres and call-girls, outsourceings and outings, hi-tech cities, online shopping, clubs and pubs, and TV reality shows and other entertainment shows for the elites; another having shanties, shit and garbage, exploitation, child labour, child prostitution, human trafficking, and organ trade.

The present chapter attempts to analyse how Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* juxtaposes the two contrasting faces of present Indian society and polity through a unique character Balram Halwai. Balram, the omniscient narrator of the novel, unfolds multiple layers of his identity constructed through myriad experiences and incidents he comes across in different phases of his life. His identity is constantly being refigured and reassumed in the course of the novel. Through his narrative lenses, in a subtle way he points out the ambiguities and illusions of a postcolonial society that can be disclosed through focusing on the dynamics that make and remake persons like him. My focus is to explore to what extent he is able to escape from the Darkness and enter into the Light, to what extent he is controlled by social hierarchies and functions of power when he wants to unshackle the chain of servitude, to what extent the world of Light illuminates his persona, and to what extent he is able to resist the system and go beyond the so-called Dark-Light binary. I bring about, in the discussion, issues of the New World Order such as multinational capitalism, global imperialism, dynamics of deprivation and discrimination, caste, class-consciousness, the myth of India shining or sinking etc. In relation to the process of individual identity formation in the web of power-
apparatuses, I mainly focus on two aspects throughout the analysis— the predicament of the third-world subalterns in the grip of neo-colonialists in postcolonial capitalist cities and their chances of resistance to the neo-colonial hegemony formulated mainly through the conditions of global capitalism in so-called postcolonial societies. I also explore the possibility and prospect of global citizenship and the process of identity shifts.

The Darkness versus the Light

Adiga in The White Tiger breaks away from the tradition of the South Asian novel significantly by experimenting with form, language, narrative and plot. The novel is concerned with issues of identity-shifts in its main character Balram Halwai. The novel progresses with a binary narrative of Indian society in a letter form having seven sections/ chapters. Balram the only narrator spends seven nights writing the letter to the Chinese Premiere, Wen Jiabao. The novel seems to provide a journalistic view of Indian society since most incidents are like newspaper reports, and some images and stories even look like those of Bollywood movies. It happens because Adiga was a journalist before becoming a novelist. However, he argues that as “one of the novel’s primary tasks is to produce a map of the contemporary...”, the journalistic reports and news the novel portrays are integrated into everyday life and become part of daily life (qtd. in Kumar unnumbered). The White Tiger drew mixed reviews from critics after it was awarded the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Manjula Padmanabhan in Outlook terms the novel “breezy-absurd.” Amitava Kumar in his review claims that the novel, which is “supposed to be a portrait of the ‘real’ India”, does not provide the authentic picture of Indian society. However, Neel
Mukherjee in *Sunday Telegraph* observes, “What Adiga lifts the lid is also inexorably true: not a single detail in this novel rings false or feels confected.” (unnumbered).

In addition to the title *The White Tiger*, the novel is full of animal imagery. The four landlords who occupy a high place in the caste hierarchy are introduced in terms of four animals: the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar, and the Raven. Balram is called the “Country-Mouse” by his fellow drivers, the poor village workers at tea stalls “human spiders”, Mukesh (Ashok’s bother) “Mongoose” by Balram, and Balram’s fellow drivers “monkeys.” Besides, the 99.9 percent Indians including the middle class, service persons, and servants of various kinds who are locked in an unbreakable servitude are compared with “hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, ... pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space.” (Adiga 173). The cage named “Rooster Coop” is the secret of India’s unity since nobody has the guts to break it and set himself/herself free. Balram observes, “The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy.” (ibid. 175). This is, in fact, an utter inaction and numbness of lower, lower middle class, and middle class Indians even in the face of dehumanisation and death (ibid. 173).

*The White Tiger* is a record of Balram’s perilous journey to discover and rediscover his self and identities in different phases of life. What he experiences during striving and surviving in Indian society makes the narrative of the novel. The novel depicts two extreme sides of India—the Darkness and the Light. Balram, a man from darkness, narrates, mainly in a binary formation, the story of the Darkness and the Light—which, he claims, changes his position, identity, and above all life—
in the format of letters sent to the Chinese premier. He describes the government village school in the Darkness where he studied—teachers looting the food and money sanctioned for students, government hospitals in villages where people die as doctors are busy serving in private clinics, lack of drinking water, defunct sewerage system etc. On the other hand, he points out that India has entrepreneurs, hi-tech cities, online marketing, call centres and all other facilities of a capitalist country (Adiga 4). One more contrast is that Delhi, the city of the light has the Red Fort, but Laxmangarh, Balram’s village of the darkness has a Black Fort (ibid. 21). In the novel, overall he proves himself to be a convincing narrator and an amazing storyteller. He learns from his surroundings by overhearing conversations.

Through his eyes we see a different India that is not compatible with the Bollywood manufactured India. His India consists of feudal landlords who are described as ferocious animals. They eat up property and lands of village peasants and the poor. Balram is the son of a land loser-turned-rickshaw puller. After losing lands to the feudal landlord, his father ended up with becoming a rickshaw puller to support his family. Though Balram belongs to the Halwai caste and is supposed to make sweets by profession, he has to work as coal-breaker and tea-boy in a small tea stall. He appears to be a social critic committed to subverting any notion of India shining. The Ganges he talks of is not a sacred river supposed to wash away sins of the devotees, but the most polluted river filled with filth and shit.

As a driver to Ashok, a rich businessman in Delhi, he has access to the elite class and politicians; which is why he comes to know the secrets of politics, politicians, social evils, corruption and all the vices of Delhi, India’s capital city. When he was in Delhi driving Mr. Ashok’s car, he got to know that politics is their
side business while booze, body (female) and bribery are their main business. Mr. Ashok and his Christian wife Pinky represent the upper class Indian citizens who aspire to be more global (American-Indian) than Indian. We have in the novel sidekicks of politicians who work as the media to the ministers and negotiate the amount of bribes.

After killing his master and stealing his money Balram flees to Bangalore. He takes up his master's name "Ashok Sharma" and runs a business as an entrepreneur by bribing the police and politicians. He becomes a neo-capitalist, one of the members of the bourgeoisie, in the shining India. Occasionally he speaks for a sort of socialist revolution in India; he even tries to justify the murder of his master as an action of the repressed against the oppressor. Though Balram has settled down in the world of capitalists, he is haunted by his past sin, the murder of his master. He has dreams to do newer businesses in order to contribute to building a really shining India. He believes that the future of the world capital lies in the East indicating the emergence of China and India as economic superpowers.

Balram comments on democracy, election system, corruption, caste, and class. He claims that because of Indian democracy he has a birthday. He is critical of the followers of Mahatma Gandhi since he finds people involved in all types of corruption, keeping his portrait in their offices as a signpost of their innocence. Elections are just a circus-show in the village, even in big cities votes can be bought and sold. Most importantly, he talks about the national numbness and a serious lack of conscience among the Indian middle class. The lower class or subalterns are

\[49\] To include his name in the voter list, "a man in a government uniform" asked him about his age or date of birth. When Balram replied that he did not know his age as his parents did not make note of his birth-date, the man said, "I think you're eighteen. I think you turned eighteen today." In this way, he "got a birth day from the government." (Adiga 96-97).
forced to remain asleep, that is, they do not have any voice or agency to speak up. It is compared to the Rooster Coop where everyone is locked in a system, and nobody is able to escape its boundary. Though they know very well that their lives are coming to an end soon, they even do not wish to resist as “Indians are the world’s most honest people, . . .” (Adiga 174). Balram thinks that the British locked all the Indians (as if they were animals) in a zoo; but when they quit India, the zoo was opened and the animals dispersed into utter wilderness, untameable and uncontrollable. According to him, at present, “the very same thing is done with human beings in this country.” (Ibid. 174). He argues that 99.9 percent of Indians mostly consisting of lower class or working class people are caught in the Rooster Coop (ibid. 175-76).

In almost all pages of the novel a dark India, an “other” India is projected with mocking and shocking images. Now we focus on the specific identity-issues such as language, agency and resistance, politics of name and caste, global citizenship in terms of multinational capitalism, identity shifts, and Balram’s psychotic self.

**Language, Agency and Resistance**

In writing the letters to the Chinese Premier Balram uses English in order to expose the inheritance of colonisation India still bears, unveil the slimy side of the Darkness, the other India, and reveal the farce of multinational capitalism in third-world cities. He has to tell the Chinese premier that the myth of Eastern countries, especially China and India emerging as superpowers is yet to be undone. Balram starts the first letter this way—
“Mr Premier,

Sir.

Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.” (Adiga 3).

In Shakespeare’s *Tempest* Prospero enslaves Caliban and teaches him his language (English) to civilise him. But when Caliban discovers the hypocrisy and fickleness of his white master’s civilisation, he uses his master’s language to confront him. He uses the language to curse, to stress what the truth is, and to articulate how he is oppressed, deprived and devastated; in a word, what he does by using English is resist:

“Caliban: ‘You taught me language; and my profit on’t

Is, I know how to curse.'” (Act-I, Scene-II)

Similarly, Balram uses the English language to expose the wounds on the body of “Mother India”, which are layered with the pretence and promises of nationalism, democracy, and modernism in the guise of global capitalism. He thinks only this English phrase “What a fucking joke” (Adiga 7) can be used to denote the double-standard of Indian entrepreneurs, businessmen, politicians, and above all the Indian society: “straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time.” (ibid. 9). He learnt the phrase from Pinky madam and later in his letter he uses it when he has an excuse to do so (ibid. 7). In his view he should use only English when he narrates a hilarious as well as a horrific story of other India through unprecedented phraseology, jaw-dropping images, razor-sharp irony, macabre humour, and sometimes a sort of “breezy absurdity.”
Several “Easternising” agencies are evident in the novel. In fact, the novel seems to be an exemplary postcolonial retort to existing neo-colonial discourses and agencies. Eastern history, philosophers and poets inspire Balram profoundly, confirming the status of indigenous cultures, life principles and even superstitions as alternative forces against the sublime and subtle theories of Eurocentrism that some postcolonialists tend to rely on. This practice can be considered another sign of writing back to the Empire/centre whatever or wherever it is.

Spivak’s claim—“the subaltern cannot speak . . . there is no space from which the subaltern can speak”—has raised a lot of debate and criticism (271-313). The debates carried on among the metropolitan academics centre on whether the subaltern has agency and voice to speak. Here the interesting thing is that until the sophisticated academics continue the debates and discussions on behalf of the subalterns, exercising their power, position and agency, the subaltern will never have any voice to speak and resist. Some Marxists like Irfan Habib, in Indian caste contexts, point out that subaltern scholars such as Spivak are happy to narrate the tragic stories of the subalterns, but they fail to lead them to acts of resistance (7). Since there are caste ideologies considered universal and often sacred in terms of religion, which the subalterns share with the ruling class or feudalists, they cannot even raise their voice against oppression and injustice, let alone protest and resist strongly. That is exactly what is depicted through the village folks of Laxmanghar (Balram’s native village) in The White Tiger. However, when given the omnipotent agency to represent and resist, they, like Balram, can speak marvellously with mordant wit.
Balram is completely free to generate his awful articulations; he can retort to anything he thinks worthy paying attention to. He is never repentant for using such a language. When a subaltern is given voice, s/he may speak in a powerful language that can challenge the pillars of established discourses. The language of one’s heart certainly diminishes the dynamics of elite taste and sensibility, for s/he cannot be silenced by telling him/her a “fucking joke.” Balram is lucky that he did not have to end up in jail to save his master’s wife. He was somehow able to escape from the Darkness to the Light even though he had to murder his master in doing so. He is seen writing letters to the Chinese prime minister sitting in his office room in front of the silver Macintosh laptop he bought online. In contrast, poor drivers, who remain drivers lifelong, could never narrate their stories because they are usually silenced by the system or frequently disappear or rot in jails. Therefore, it should be noted that when Balram enjoys having money, power and agency after changing himself into an entrepreneur, only then is he able to speak or tell his story.

Name and Identity

“Meet Balram Halwai, the ‘White Tiger’: servant, philosopher, entrepreneur, murderer. . .”, the back-cover of the book reads. Balram, a vibrantly moving and round character, undergoes a rigorous process of identity-shifts that transfers him from a schoolboy in a village school to a tea-boy, to an awkward village folk, to a servant-cum-driver, to a killer, to an entrepreneur, to a thinking man, and to what not. He claims to be the “White Tiger” who has broken the prison filled with half-

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50 Pinky killed a street child when she, deadly drunk, was driving the Honda City in total recklessness (Adiga 162).
baked Indians and joined the lot of pot-bellied businessmen. Apart from his name Balram Halwai, he is called by other names such as Munna and the country-mouse, and after killing his master, he takes up his (master’s) name Ashok Sharma. In relation to his different names sometimes his identity is forcefully imposed, his real identity is ignored or interpreted in terms of caste hierarchies.

Name is a marker of someone’s caste background and social status in India. Most times in Indian society caste-identity, whether in the Darkness or in the Light, proves to be more credible than other identities. When Balram seeks employment as driver, his driving skill is not considered, it is only his caste that can guarantee him the job. After he takes part in a driving test, the master asks him—

“What’s your last name again?”

‘Halwai.’

‘Halwai . . .’ He turned to the small dark man. ‘What caste is that, top or bottom?’” (Adiga 62)

Balram knows that his fortune depends on the answer to this last question. However, caste-identity is not only considered for menial jobs in rural places or in a feudal society, but also taken for granted in official job interviews. Prakash Jha’s film Arakshan (2011) starts with a scene in which the protagonist (Saif Ali Khan) Deepak Kumar appears in front of an interview board. The first question one of the board members asks is— “Deepak . . . Kumar (stressing “Kumar” with a scornful tone), what is your full name?” Before selecting him for the job, they first want to know his family background and social status. Quite surprisingly, they have not asked any questions with regard to his subject and specialisation. After confirming
that he is from a lower caste background, they start humiliating him. The interview
ends with Deepak Kumar’s protest in a mild-mannered way:

“You’ve been repeatedly mocking my caste and status.”

He then boldly states— “A person’s intelligence and performance do not depend on
his background.” To prove his statement, he refers to Babasaheb Ambedkar, who
outlined India’s Constitution:

“It was a backward caste person who drafted our country’s
Constitution.”

Deepak Kumar stood first in his M. Sc in the university’s merit list, but he is
not identified with that. Just after learning his caste identity, the interviewer’s
attitudes change drastically—and they know that they are not selecting him even
though he is the topper. This brief scene speaks volumes about the discriminatory
and exclusionary practice on the basis of caste identity in the twenty first century
Indian society. This scene underscores how one’s identity is fixed in the social
hierarchy, even before his birth. The scene further reminds one of the wound of
deep-rooted social divisions in India, which is yet to be healed. The people involved
in the scene are all from the educated class who are supposed to evaluate a job
seeker’s identity on the basis of performance, aptitude, and qualification rather than
his pre-determined caste background. This ever-existing caste hierarchy, in fact,
challenges discourses centring on the making of “Mother” India, “shining” India, or
its claim to being “the world’s largest democracy”.

Balram refers to the caste system that existed in the past and how everyone
in their place was happy. It was like a clean, well-kept, orderly zoo. “Goldsmiths
here. Cowherds here. Landlords there. The man called a Halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows. The untouchable cleaned faeces.” (Adiga 63). However, he argues that though in older days “there were one thousand castes and destinies in India, in the present day capitalist India, there exist only two castes: “Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.”(ibid. 64). Balram’s comment seems naïve as he offers a sort of holistic observation, ignoring the urge to abolish the system. Ambedkar differs from Gandhi on the caste issue—while the former professes the elimination of the entire system, “identifying the problem as the “symptom” of the entire system, the symptom which can only be resolved by way of abolishing the entire system”, the latter accepts the system as essential and fundamental, calling the outcastes or untouchables euphemistically “Harijans”(children of God) and “allowing them to ‘fall in love with themselves’ in their humiliating identity, to accept their degrading work as a noble necessary social task, to perceive even the degrading nature of their work as a sign of their sacrifice, of their readiness to do the dirty job for society.” (Zizek, unnumbered)

In *The White Tiger*, a few characters such as Vijay can be located who could overcome the caste boundary by becoming involved in politics, working as sidekicks to the big politicians and thus making money and acquiring status. Probably, this is the reason Balram estimates that in India there are only two castes: the rich and the poor. Again, it is a fact that caste issue is over-politicised to exploit particular caste communities as a means of coming to power. Many politicians may speak for a casteless and classless society, but they would not practice it in their lives. In this regard, M. N. Srinivas in his book *Caste in Modern India* mentions a thoughtful anecdote. In Mysore during April 1954, there was a fight between Holeyas
(Harijans) and Okkaligas (Peasants) as Holeyas were demanding Okkaliga girls be
given in marriage to them. When one Okkaliga leader complained to Srinivas, he
tried to “explain to him the aims and ideals of the Congress and the Republic
[casteless and classless society], . .” The Okkaliga leader replied shrewdly, hitting
the nail on the head: “Then let them [the elected representatives] invite Holeyas to
their homes for dinner, and give them their daughters in marriage, and we will
follow suit.” (71).

Though the attempt to abolish caste system is one of the social reforms
promised by all political parties in India, it is found inseparably rooted in all strata of
society. Habib in his essay “Caste in Indian Society” concludes, “Caste still remains
perhaps the single most important divisive factor in our country [India].” (Essays in
Indian History 179)

Ashok Sharma: A Global Citizen of Tomorrow’s India?
The effects of globalisation in the age of multinational capitalism can affect one’s
identity construction. Driven by the ultimate urge of global capitalism, a new
capitalist citizen can emerge with a sense of cultural cosmopolitanism, accessibility
to communication network across the globe, an eastward flow of global capital, and
an all-through availability of cheap commodities in third-world cities. Nick
Stevenson in “Globalisation, National Cultures and Cultural Citizenship” develops
an argument with respect to the media of mass communication, globalisation
processes and what is called cultural citizenship. Stevenson argues that in the British
and European contexts the flow of globalisation makes national cultures more
powerful whereas in postcolonial or third-world cities globalised elites seem less
aware of national cultures and ethics. In relation to Mr. Ashok, one of the important characters in Balram’s narratives, we can attempt to link together the conditions of globalising processes and the possibilities of global citizenship in the context of the development of communication systems and the fast flow of capitals eastward.

Ashok, an Indian-American, is mainly portrayed through Balram’s forceful narratives. Convinced by his father and brother, who are feudal masters-turned-city-scams, that there are a lot of opportunities in India emerging as an economic superpower, Ashok along with his wife Pinky comes back to India to run his family business. What we learn from Balram’s narrative is that among other family members Ashok is a bit generous as a landlord. He several times comes in Balram’s defence. When Ashok’s elder brother Mukesh is not allowing Balram to read his letter (sent by his granny) even though he knows how to read, Ashok protests—“Doesn’t he have the right to read his own letters?” (Adiga 189). Moreover, while it is one of the most important duties for Balram as a driver to massage the Stork’s (Ashok’s father) feet, Ashok never allows Balram to massage his feet. He, in fact, is enraged and kicks the bucket on the floor when Balram insists on massaging his feet. (ibid. 191)

Ashok appears to be clumsy at first when he comes to know that in Delhi business, politics, prostitution, and bribery are interrelated. To Balram, Delhi, the capital of a glorious nation is “[t]he seat of Parliament, of the president, of all ministers and prime ministers. The pride of our civil planning. The showcase of the republic. . . . And the truth is that Delhi is a crazy city.”(Adiga 118). Delhi is not only depicted as a messy city with unplanned lanes, buildings, housings growing

51 Mukesh: ‘Why do you always defend him, Ashok?’ (Adiga 120).
abruptly, streets having peculiar names and numbers, never ending traffic jams and thousands of people from the Darkness living like animals "under the huge bridges and overpasses," and "defecating in the open . . . in front of the slum", but also a “make-it-happen” city with business-scams, ministers taking bribes, all forces of globalisation and urbanisation: IT industries, real estate business, pubs, bars, five star hotels, call-girls, and what not. Just back from America, Ashok is quite tensed about high-taxes, but his brother Mukesh informs him of the “fixer” fellow who fixes up tax-free business in Delhi. He adds— “This is India, not America. There is always a way out here.” (ibid. 121).

Later, Ashok ends up being part of the global network of elites who thrive in any part of the world as agents of global political economy. He aspires to stay back in Delhi as he senses that the Indian economy is shining for the neo-capitalists in Gurgaon, the modernest suburb of Delhi having all prospects—American Express, Microsoft, and offices of all big American companies, shopping malls each having a cinema inside — to be a first world city such as New York (Adiga 122). He thinks his Americanised wife Pinky will be happy to live with yoga\(^{52}\), the Indian secret of happy living for the rich and two Pomeranian dogs: Cuddles and Puddles “in Gurgaon [as] it’s the most American part of the city.”\(^{53}\) (ibid. 121). However, Pinky cannot cope with the life in Delhi not only because she misses American life a lot, but she can no longer stand the “Indian” hypocrisy and double-standard of Ashok and his family, and eventually she leaves Ashok for America. After she leaves,

\(^{52}\) A reference to Yoga master (Ramdev) on TV (189).

\(^{53}\) However, Balram also points out that Gurgaon was not built in a planned way and there are problems of sewerage, waste management, electricity and water supply in the big apartments of the city. A BBC report published recently proves the novel’s speculation, terming the city a “slum for the rich.”

See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-19044076>
Ashok gradually blends with the facades of “liquid modernity”\textsuperscript{54} as he uses smartphones to have business-chats with someone in New York, draws money from ATM machines or runs online banking, frequently visits five star hotels, pubs, discos, and shops at mega shopping malls (ibid. 142). But he fails pathetically to be a truly cosmopolitan citizen; he remains merely a player in the global network of power, politics and corruption.

Ashok’s business in India is more profitable, and he can make more money in Delhi. He is just a part of any other business-scams who run tax-free businesses and loot national and natural resources such as coalmines, stones etc. by bribing the ministers, and could also be exposed at anytime in the media as one of the schemers of coalgate scams.\textsuperscript{55} This is the impulse that forces him to stay in Delhi instead of going back to America with Pinky. On a drive to his ancestral village, Ashok and Pinky are seen debating on returning to America. Pinky asks Ashok—

“Why are we going to this place in the middle of nowhere, Ashoky?”

“It’s my ancestral village, Pinky. Wouldn’t you like to see it? I was born there — but Father sent me away as a boy.” (Adiga 80).

Pinky insists on going back, asking him several times about their returning date, but Ashok seems unsure and tricks her by answering uncertainly. However, Ashok seems to have a sort of identity-crisis and a sense of belonging and not-belonging as

\textsuperscript{54} The concepts and facets of liquid modernity obviously trace back to Zygmunt Bauman’s book \textit{Liquid Modernity}.

he feels, to some extent, the smell of his birthplace during his visit to his native village. On other occasions, he can feel the joy and innocence of the village people who remain unspoiled and uncorrupted (ibid. 191). But his faithful driver-cum-servant Balram finishes him off ironically when he becomes feeble and extremely dependent on him, and is just able to understand the importance of family life and other Eastern values, after getting bored with the illusions of “make-it-happen” city and the promises of eastward-bound fortunes.

Balram Halwai: A Neurotic?

Balram makes a well devised plan to murder his master and rob his money to escape from the Darkness and become an entrepreneur in a hi-tech city Bangalore. In today’s India claiming to be a superpower in coming years he thinks he represents “tomorrow”. In his journey from a village tea-boy to a chauffeur, to an entrepreneur, he claims to be a “self-taught entrepreneur”, “first-geared man”, a “thinking man”, and “a man of action and change” (Adiga 5). However, he is no more than another emerging capitalist playing with power, politics and corruption even though he thinks that he represents the fellows from the Darkness. The power-praxis, as power is all pervasive, can function in top-down or bottom-up chains, at the discretion of the perpetrators. The vertical chain of power is evident in the entire narrative of the novel. For instance, the ministers have sidekicks who suck up to the landlords and businessmen who bugger the public and their servants, and the servants exercise power at their discretion on other servants having lesser power. Moreover, Balram’s claim that while people are committing innumerable sins and crimes, he commits only one murder is not well grounded since there is nothing like less murderous, less
corrupt or less fascist, to quote Latin American writer-activist Roque Dalton, “don’t ever forget that the least fascist among the fascists are also fascists.” (qtd. in McClure unnumbered).

Balram is a psychologically distorted, mentally deranged and sexually dissatisfied person. He could uplift himself from a village folk to an entrepreneur, to the “white tiger”, but in so doing he loses all his sanity, which might stand for the loss of national conscience at the expense of embracing the force of global capitalism. One should ponder over the question of his cool-blooded murdering of his master: is it the only way out for changing his fate? He thinks he is able to change his life and identity after listening to an Urdu couplet in Old Delhi. An old Muslim bookseller reads to him—

“You were looking for the key for years
But the door was always open!” (Adiga 253).

At this point he finally decides to kill Ashok after a lot of reflections and hesitations. But how he exploits the message conveyed by the couplet to justify his murder does not escape our attention. In this regard, we remember the classic Hollywood movie Babyface (1933), in which the protagonist Lily Powers exploits Nietzsche’s existential philosophy\textsuperscript{56} to find power and position in a capitalist society. Though she uses men of different classes to change her position in office and to have a respectful identity in society, she, like Balram, is never remorseful until the last scene.

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\textsuperscript{56} “All life no matter how we idealize it... is nothing more, nor less than exploitation.” (Nietzsche, \textit{Will to Power}); “Face life as you find it—defiantly and unafraid. Waste no energy yearning for the moon. Crush out all sentiment. Remember that sentiment is opposed to reason and rational thought” (Nietzsche, \textit{Thoughts out of Seasons}).
The driver Balram is treated as a servant, abused, humiliated and ignored. A
driver in a rich feudal family has to play multiple roles: servant, cook, sweeper,
massager (he massages Stork’s feet soaked in warm water) and also a source of
jokes and humour. His pronunciation of “mall” (maal) in “shopping mall”, his stupid
answers to the questions asked by Pinky or Ashok, and his dressing up like a
Maharaja all serve as a great source of entertainment to the couple. In fact, they take
morbid pleasure in humiliating him. However, in a letter Balram’s grandmother
mentions that he is different from other children from his childhood; he is deep,
thoughtful and serious by nature (Adiga 190).

Balram does something he has never done before. After witnessing his
master taking a girl to his flat that night, who he (Balram) takes to be a slut, he lets
himself loose on the streets of Delhi dressed as Maharaja. This particular incident
shows the abnormal or neurotic side of Balram. It is a kind of relief for him from the
feeling of inferiority complex and inability to do what his master is doing. He is
ashamed to admit that he cheats his master on a number of occasions. But he does
not feel guilty of it; rather, he feels “rage” each time he cheats him. “The more I
stole from him, the more I realised how much he had stolen from me.” (Adiga 231).
On the verge of paying for having sex with a golden haired whore he becomes brave
enough to tell his driver friend, “I am my own master.” (ibid. 232). The Vitiligo-
lipped driver feels proud of him and urges him to do “it” on behalf of the oppressed
driver.

In utter drunkenness Pinky drives recklessly and kills a street child (Adiga
162). The consequences of this incident show that the rich man’s pleasure may take
someone’s life, and gift their servant a life time service in one of the prisons in
Delhi. Late night Balram washes the blood, torn flesh and bits of clothes fourth times (ibid. 163). Later he is tricked to sign a statement that he hit the “thing” in darkness and except him no one was in the car that night. (ibid. 167). They also manage his grandmother Kusum to be one of the two witnesses. Balram observes seriously that this is the fate that most drivers in Delhi are bound to embrace. “The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters” and because the masters still own them—“body, soul, and arse.” (ibid. 169). He then remarks scornfully, “We all live in the world’s greatest democracy here.” “What a fucking joke.” (ibid.). He knows for sure that “judges take bribe, . . . And life goes on . . . for everyone but the driver” (ibid.).

Balram tells the Chinese premier the sorrowful tale of how he is corrupted from “a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness.”(Adiga 197). According to him, it all happens when he comes to Delhi as a driver and sees the real face of the city. Besides, his master’s moral deviation demoralises him to a large extent. After Pinky leaves him, Ashok goes insane and almost throws Balram out of the balcony that might have killed him, holding him responsible for driving Pinky to the airport. Then a strange relationship begins between the master and the servant. When Ashok is drunk and senseless, Balram takes unbound pleasure in humiliating him by slapping on his face. Again he serves him all through—making his meal and bed, washing his face when he vomits etc.. He tries his best to entertain his master—“I joked—I even sang a song—all to make Mr Ashok feel better.” (ibid. 187). He even claims that like the chauffeur Krishna he philosophises on the meaning of life. He mimics him, his dress, his
manner, and even his lust. Then his "genuine concern" ends and self-interest begins (ibid.). He starts spoiling Ashok’s weakness, oblivion and helplessness. He reveals—

"Do we loathe our masters behind a façade of love or do we love them behind a façade of loathing?" (ibid.)

He lets himself float in the corrupting ditch of Delhi just after knowing that his master is no longer honest, but involved in corruptions in all forms. He gets reckless when he finds his master reckless. Thus he never ceases to rot in Delhi. One can argue that he is a by-product of Ashok who gets corrupted in Delhi.

Balram feels that filthy poison has been injected into his blood and his body is changed like that as Mother Ganges is contaminated by sewerage and industrial poisons (Adiga 193). In the film *Taxi Driver* (1976), we find a similar driver named Travis, a mentally disturbed and sexually deranged person, who drives only at night in New York City as he suffers from serious insomnia. He is extremely disturbed by the pollution, prostitution, politics, mismanagement of sewerage, drainage system etc. of the city. He keeps a diary in which he writes—

"All the animals come out at night—whores, skunk-pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies. Sick, venal."

He urges to "[r]emove all the shit from the city" as he thinks “someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets.” By judging that politicians are responsible for pollution and corruption in the cities like New York, he attempts to assassinate the presidential candidate. Before doing that he makes a plan and prepares himself to be a trained gunman after realising that power lies in arms and
money. Unlike Balram who writes letters to the Chinese premier, he writes letters to his parents. After a gunfight with the pimps to save a forced-to-be-prostitute girl from them, he somehow escapes death and is rewarded, but the movie indicates that a part of him will remain evil. Though Balram is occasionally haunted by his past sin, he permanently becomes a cool-blooded socio-path like Travis.

Conclusion

Balram’s infatuation with chandeliers is quite evident in the novel. The chandelier in his office room appears as an inspirational muse to him, a sort of secret source for his narrative power. According to him, it illuminates darkness; when his story gets darker, Balram wants to be reminded by the Chinese Premier of turning the chandelier up a bit. It reveals things and helps him to recall things when he is not in the right pace. It, of course, reminds him of his past story. He admits—

“When you forget something, all you have to do is to stare at the glass pieces....” (Adiga 118).

Apparently Balram’s self judgement and self criticism give his personality some sort of acceptance to his readers. But in reality, he remains a roguish criminal, is haunted forever, not happy, and attempts to calm his restless mind by looking at the chandelier or practising yoga.

Unquestionably, the grim world The White Tiger portrays through Balram is “far removed from the glossy images of Bollywood stars and technology entrepreneurs that have been displacing earlier (and equally clichéd) Indian stereotypes featuring yoga and spirituality.” (Kapur Unnumbered). But the rich
urban Indians are not prepared to see this projection of Indian life and society. In Kapur’s view, after the novel was awarded the Man Booker Prize, “some in India lambasted it as a Western conspiracy to deny the country’s economic progress.” (unnumbered). However, through unsentimental prose and an unprecedented character Adiga seems committed to stripping away “the sheen of a self-congratulatory nation and reveals instead a country where the social compact is being stretched to the breaking point.” (ibid.).

As a novelist Adiga’s achievement is not beyond question. The oversimplification of the narrative to highlight all the evils and vices of Indian society may seem biased and monotonous. The novel is sometimes overwhelmed by the blank, bleak, and pervading horror of “the Darkness” where there seems no light, no passage for one to come out to see a ray of sunlight. Beside, all characters are not developed naturally, especially Ashok and his wife seem to be stereotyped projections of upper-class elites and on certain occasions they are reduced to caricatures. Though Balram remains at the centre of the novel, he does not sound true all the time. Overall, the narrative of the novel lacks the profundity of complex human relations. Balram narrates his story, mostly using his verbal prowess whereas the complexity of his inner thoughts does not bloom fully.

To sum up, we can assert that the real nature of Indian society is somewhere between the media depiction of India shining and Balram’s projection of the “other” India. Undoubtedly, India’s prospect of emerging as a superpower in world politics and economy throws a number of challenges before the vast country of the South Asian region. Sameer Amin in his essay “India, a Great Power?”, presenting the concept of India shining along with the picture of real India, brings about all the
possible challenges India has to come across and deal with to be really shining in the world. He doubts that “independent India has not tackled the major challenge of radically transforming structures inherited from colonial capitalism” and questions the possibility of “India’s accession to the status of a great modern power . . . without undergoing real social revolution.” (unnumbered). As a huge country, India must have a lot of problems and prospects stemming out of diversities and the very notion of “unity-in-diversity”.

It is difficult to depict Indian society as a whole, as there are so many layers and dimensions based on cultural, linguistic, regional, religious, indigenous and other aspects. The attempt to generalise India’s diversities into one framework is a futile and ridiculous one. However, Adiga’s characters somehow manage to bring forth some tensions and issues of the present Indian society that deserve to be pondered upon.

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57 It is a cliché about diversities of South Asia. Bose and Jalal suggest that it would be more appropriate to characterise South Asian countries such as India and their peoples as presenting a picture of “immense diversity within a broad contour of unity.” (4).
Works Cited


*Baby Face*. Dir. Alfred E. Green. Warner Brothers, 1933. Film.


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