

Perspectives

Double Vision in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Indian novels have increasingly turned to representing rural life. In addition to work produced by regional artists, the work of writers such as Munshi Premchand, in Hindi, and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee, in Bengali, reflects the everyday problems of rural communities. Premchand's *Godaan* expresses profound indignation and protest against the obscurantist beliefs, archaic and harmful customs, and social distinctions that fetter rural Indian society. In K.S. Venkataramani's novel *Murugan, the Tiller*, "The scene shifts from village to town and back from town (or city) to village, till [sic] at last one has the feeling that all roads lead to Murugan and his rural experiment" (Iyengar 279).

The novels of Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao present an authentic picture of Indian life examined from multiple angles. Rao's *Kanthapura* is the story of a village and its people whose lives derive meaning from their identification with temple, river, hill, mound, and market, a peasant sensibility expressed in a style unique to Indian fiction. As Paul Verghese observes, as a rural novel, it records:

The changeless, yet ever-shifting spectrum that is Indian village life. The description of the village—its physical features and separate quarters for those belonging to different castes, and professions—and the day-to-day life of the villagers with the monotonous events of planting, harvesting, and marrying, and the occasional celebrations of festivals allaying the even tenor of their life is quite realistic. (145)

Kanthapura is India in microcosm: what happens in this story is what happened everywhere in rural India during the early stages of India's struggle for freedom. K.A. Abbas' novel *Tomorrow is Ours* exposes "the exploitation of the poor Indians by the rich Indians" (Harrex 218).

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *So Many Hungers* is concerned with the peasants in Bengal during the terrible famine that devastated millions. Bhattacharya envisions a new model of an ideal village that incorporates the best of both the past and present and strives to liberate villagers from the clutches of old beliefs and superstitions.

Charles Dickens describes the exploitation of children by factory owners; he also carefully portrays the brutal living conditions of the masses, amidst the dirt and squalor of cities permeated with dense black clouds of smoke. Dickens viewed the city “[a]s a destructive animal, a monster, utterly beyond the individual human scale” (Williams 38). Similarly, Anand emerges as a powerful novelist who, in his novel *Coolie*, exposes the evils of poverty, child labour, social injustice, inequality, communal hatred, capitalist exploitation, unemployment, human vanity, and inhuman cruelty to women and children, which, to many, were the characteristics of Indian urban life in the 1930s. Kamala Markandaya's *A Handful of Rice* realistically presents the baffling overcrowdedness of urban city life, the lives and experiences of underworld criminals, and the exploitation of impoverished rural migrants by wealthier city dwellers.

Aravind Adiga, winner of the 2008 Man Booker Prize, is the first novelist who “has taken an exhilarating ride through the darkest alleys of modern India” (Prasannarajan, “Alone” 7). His riveting, razor-sharp debut novel, *The White Tiger*, is about Balram Halwai who, over the course of seven nights, narrates the story of his voyage from “Darkness to Light,”¹ from rags to riches, transforming from a village tea shop boy into a Bangalore entrepreneur. Balram tells his story to an empty room as he stares at an ostentatious chandelier. As a great entrepreneur, he wants to keep in touch with “His Excellency Wen Jiabao,” the Chinese Premier who is poised to visit Bangalore with a view to understanding entrepreneurship in India. The volatile and captivating narrator provides the Chinese premier with a compelling portrait of modern India, stating “that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river” (14). Balram, who is also referred to

as “Munna,” “White Tiger,” “Coal,” “Country-Mouse,” “village idiot,” “driver of cars,” “connoisseur of sculpture,” “working-class hero,” and “original listener,” recalls his past during his successful entrepreneurship in Bangalore, the leading Information Technologies city of India. He is from Laxmangarh, a small, impoverished village in Bihar, which is symbolically part of the rural darkness that the author describes in the earlier quote, a polarized world that is unequally shared by the landowning class and the peasantry. Like all rural children, he inhabits the Darkness, “[a] place where basic necessities such as clean water, a home, money and health are routinely snatched away by the wealthy, who live up there in the Light” (Rushby).

Balram’s family is so poor they cannot afford to send him to school, and so he is put to work in a tea shop. As he crushes coal and wipes tables he nurses a dream of escape—of breaking away from the banks of mother Ganga into whose murky depths have seeped faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion and seven different kinds of industrial acids (Adiga 15). Balram gets his break when he is hired as chauffeur for a rich village landlord’s son, daughter-in-law, and the couple’s two Pomeranian dogs, Cuddles and Puddles. Balram is taken to the prosperous suburb of Gurgaon, a satellite city of Delhi. He feels that Delhi is the place of light. Amid the cockroaches and call centres, the 36,000,004 gods, the slums, the shopping malls, and the crippling traffic jams, he is increasingly aware of the immense wealth and opportunity around him. Caught between his instinct to be a loyal son, his obligations as an indentured servant, and his desire to better himself, he learns of a new “morality,” i.e., acquisitiveness and hedonism, at the heart of Delhi.

As the other drivers flick through the pages of *Murder Weekly*, Balram seethes with thoughts of the indignities he endures. He eventually achieves freedom by killing his master with an empty bottle of Johnnie Walker Black, smashing his master’s head and then cutting his throat. Ironically, this becomes a stepping stone to his glorious place in India’s future—as an entrepreneur in the hallowed city of Bangalore, a city of technology and outsourcing. After the murder of his master, Balram, accompanied by his young nephew, reaches this new city.

Thus, the novel becomes, as its blurb tell us, “a tale of two Indias—India of Darkness and India of Light.” Balam’s journey from “The darkness of village life to the light of entrepreneurial success is utterly amoral, brilliantly irreverent, deeply endearing, and altogether unforgettable” (Harrex 218).

Adiga states that his novel highlights the brutal injustices of a changing India on the brink of emerging as a world power. The novel is “not an attack on India. . . . but it’s about the greater process of self-examination” (Jeffries). The text suggests that India and China are too powerful to be controlled by the West anymore and that Indians must break free from the chains that are holding them back from greater progress as a national power. Perhaps this is the reason for Adiga’s idea of involving the Chinese premier in the plot of the story: a possible future alliance between these two nations.

Adiga exhibits one aspect of his double vision—the ability to present both rural and urban perspectives—throughout the novel. Set in contemporary India, the novel revolves around the great divide between those Indians who have made it and those who have not. The novel abounds in animal imagery through which Adiga presents rural life. Recurring references to the lower animals and man’s likeness to them convey the meaning of the novel. Four animals, the Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar, and Raven, are compared to the four landlords of the village, who “fed on the village, and everything that grew in it, until there was nothing left for anyone else to feed on” (Adiga 26). The souls of these beasts seem to have entered the bodies of the heinous landlords. The novelist loathes the horror and enormities of these landlords, who, with their monstrous nature, hold the entire village in indentured labour. As C.J. George rightly observes, “The introduction of money into the rural economy is responsible for the moral decadence in village life” (167).

The peasants also suffer as a result of usury: they cannot repay the money they have borrowed from the landlords. They fall prey to the hard-heartedness, greed, lechery, callousness, arrogance, hypocrisy, and selfishness of the feudal landlords. Whether they want to graze animals, use the roads for their carts, to fish or use the water for ferrying, the villagers must pay their rapacious landlords. Balam’s family members

become terrible victims of their landlord's exploitation. Balram excels at school and wins encomiums from the school inspector, who, impressed with his intelligence, praises him as The White Tiger, "the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation" (Adiga 35). The inspector gives Balram a book entitled *Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi* and promises Balram will be given a scholarship to attend a proper school in the city so that he can fulfill his potential. Unfortunately the White Tiger is pulled out of school and asked to work in a tea stall to pay off his father's debt to their landlord.

The novelist is passionately concerned with the extreme poverty and the personal sufferings induced by severe economic disparity (Walsh 27). See, for example, how the novel attends to the plight of the "boys" working in a typical tea shop along the banks of the Ganga:

Look at the men, working in the tea shop—men, I say, but better to call them human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still "boys." But that is your fate if you do your job well—with honesty, dedication, and sincerity the way Gandhi would have done it, no doubt. (Adiga 51)

The expression "do your job well" thus becomes a euphemism for an intense form of servitude.

Adiga draws our attention to the abject poverty that exists in India. As in Premchand's "The Shroud," which details the attempt of a father and son to collect subscriptions to bury the dead body of a woman, Balram narrates his mother's death and funeral: "My mother's body had been wrapped from head to toe in a saffron silk cloth, which was covered in rose petals and jasmine garlands. I don't think she had ever had such a fine thing to wear in her life. (Her death was so grand that I knew, all at once, that her life must have been miserable. My family was guilty about something)" (16). The White Tiger in Balram becomes a spider, as with other poor children who work in tea stalls. Balram's position derives from his parents who, loaded with debt and disease, harvest little grain but reap a prolific crop of troubles all year round.

Sometimes a drought may persist in a village, thereby turning the condition of the entire village from bad to worse. Severe conditions of drought are summed up in Anand's novel *The Village*:

All was baked in the sun, which shone with the relentless fury of a demon, pitiless and unforgiving, the rays becoming stronger and stronger everyday till the crescendo of the drought seemed to have been reached. And yet the thunder in the air into which the heat often matures, did not appear. (63)

When drought paralyses the normal life of the village, the villagers are forced to seek work in cities such as Calcutta, Delhi, and Dhanbad. The men collect their baggage and leave the women in the village. They work for one season and save money and return with their earnings.

In *The White Tiger*, workers return to Laxmangarh after periods of hard labour in the cities:

A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh. There was fighting and wailing and shrieking. My uncles would resist, and managed to keep some of their money, but my father got peeled and skinned every time. "I survived the city, but I couldn't survive the women in my home," he would say, sunk into a corner of the room. The women would feed him after they fed the buffalo. (Adiga 26)

Thus, a description of Balram's village becomes an authentic description of the hardships endured by the rural populations of many Indian villages.

Similarly, the primary school system presented in *The White Tiger* could describe the school system in any rural Indian village. As Somini Sengupta, writing for *The New York Times*, observes:

Sixty years after independence, with 40 percent of its population under 18, India is now confronting the perils of its failure to educate its citizens, notably the poor. More Indian children

are in school than ever before, but . . . government schools have become reserves of children at the very bottom of India's social ladder. . . . The latest survey, conducted across 16000 villages in 2007 found that while many more children were sitting in class, vast numbers of them could not read, write or perform basic arithmetic, to say nothing of those who were not in school at all. . . . [P]arents "would ask [Mr. Ghosh, a social worker], 'What are you going to give me [if I send my child to school]? Your porridge isn't enough. Because if I send my child to herd a buffalo, at least he'll make 3 rupees.'"

The school in Laxmangarh is no exception. The children in the village begin at the very bottom. Indeed, Balram is without so much as a name: his family calls him only Munna or boy. It is the schoolteacher who names him Balram Halwai. Later, a local official decides on the date of Balram's birth in order to facilitate the theft of his vote. In that semblance of a school, there is a teacher, a "big *paan*-and-spit man—and his expectorate made a sort of low, red wallpaper on three walls" (Adiga 29) of the room, as he magnanimously spared the fourth wall, a faded mural of the Lord Buddha surrounded by deer and squirrels. When the teacher went to sleep by noon, the pupils "stole *paan* from his pockets; distributed it among [them]selves and chewed on it; and then imitating his spitting style – hands on hips, back arched slightly – took turns spitting at the three dirty walls (29). The teacher avails himself of the numerous advantages made available to him by the school and his pupils—uniforms, lunch money, furniture—thereby retrieving his missing wages. Such is the despicable state of rural schools.

The public health system is in a very desperate condition in rural India. In the novelist's own words, "Well, this is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about . . . In somewhere like Bihar there will be no doctors in the hospital. . . . This is a country where the poor fear tuberculosis, which kills 1,000 Indians a day" (Jeffries). Balram's father suffers from tuberculosis. His eyes are deep and vacant. He is as lean as a skeleton. Nonetheless, he ekes out his livelihood by pedaling a rickshaw. When he is crippled he is supposed to be

admitted into a hospital. To the dismay of the characters, there are not any hospitals in Laxmangarh “although there are three different foundation stones for hospitals, laid by three different politicians before three different elections” (Adiga 47). The lack of hospitals in rural communities is a sad reality across India. With the help of a boatman, Balram and his brother manage to take their father to an unimpressive building on the other side of the river. Lohia Universal Free Hospital receives them “with three black goats sitting on the steps to the faded white building. . . . The glass in most of the windows was broken; a cat was staring out at us from one cracked window” (48). The patients slowly pour in, but the doctors never appear. These doctors are in the good books of the politicians who receive huge amounts from them. The powerful politicians tolerate these doctors who earn huge amounts elsewhere and ignore the patients in the rural areas. Consequently Balram’s father collapses, and the entire family is in despair. Under these circumstances, Balram searches for greener pastures elsewhere. His quest for freedom and light continues.

Balram sets out to give an account of election fever—the awe-inspiring splendour of one billion people casting their votes to determine their own future. Surprisingly the Great Socialist, against whom a total of ninety-three criminal cases—for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-smuggling, pimping, and many other minor offenses—are pending, engineers elections and remains the boss of the Darkness for decades. In Balram’s own words, “he had come to clean things up, but the mud of Mother Ganga had sucked him in. Others said he was dirty from the start, but he had just fooled everyone and only now did we see him for what he was. . . . He had ruled the Darkness, winning election after election” (97). When the elections are held the villagers discuss them like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra. Election rigging is a perennial phenomenon, usually accompanied by violence.

City life is associated with corruption, skullduggery, pollution, toxic traffic jams, squalor, and a mechanical, alienated way of life. Adiga is at his best when he sharply portrays the glaring contrast of the life of darkness of the rural people with the light—the successful entrepreneurship—of the urban masses. The city, with its enormity and industrial development,

attracts the rural masses with the prospect of employment. While driving in a comfortable Honda SUV, Balram sees the poverty-stricken rural masses taking refuge under overpasses and railway stations. He sympathises with the lack of good manners on the part of the rural masses, and “[w]ith detached, scatological precision, he surveys the grey remoteness of an India where the dispossessed and the privileged are not steeped in the stereotypes of struggle and domination” (Prasannarajan, “Books”).

Adiga scathingly attacks the concept of urban corruption. In India it takes the form of patronage; a politician or bureaucrat who takes a bribe has to let it trickle down among a series of lesser bureaucrats and elected officials, who will make sure that pet projects are completed. Ashok, the landlord’s elder son, is asked by his father to drop off bags of money to politicians for tax breaks, and he himself is involved in bartering for girls, drinking single malt whisky and playing a key role in the domination of the lower classes. All corrupt practices are carried on either under a picture of Mahatma Gandhi or holy pictures of innumerable goddesses. Balram, a doe-eyed child of Laxmanagarh, having become a driver in Delhi, learns how to siphon gas, deal with corrupt mechanics, and refill and resell bottles of Johnnie Walker Black. An instance of this dark world of corruption is depicted thus:

Every day, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffeur is driving an empty car with a black suitcase sitting on the back seat. Inside that suitcase is a million, two million rupees; more money than that chauffeur will see in his lifetime. If he took the money he could go to America, Australia, anywhere, and start a new life.
(Adiga 174)

Another aspect of the novelist’s double vision is evident from his comprehensive description of the two aspects of Delhi, Darkness and Light, which pervade the entire city. Old Delhi is a typical symbol of both darkness and light, where one sees:

things that the modern world forgot all about – rickshaws, old stone buildings, and Muslims. On a Sunday, though, there is something more: if you keep pushing through the crowd that is always there, go past the men clearing the other men’s ears by

poking rusty metal rods into them, past the men selling small fish trapped in green bottles full of brine, past the cheap shoe market and the cheap shirt market, you will come to the great second-hand book market of Daryaganj . . . it is one of the wonders of the world. (251–52)

The novel highlights the interminable, exasperating traffic jams and pollution that plague Delhi. Some drivers mercilessly spit on the road when stopped at a red light. Others rebuke fellow drivers and exchange heated words. Balram describes one such instance:

There was a fierce jam on the road to Gurgaon. Every five minutes the traffic would tremble—we'd move a foot—hope would rise—then the red lights would flash on the cars ahead of me, and we'd be struck again. Everyone honked. Every now and then, the various horns, each with its own pitch, blended into one continuous wail that sounded like a calf taken from its mother. Fumes filled the air. Wisps of blue exhaust glowed in front of every headlight; the exhaust grew so fat and thick it could not rise or escape, but spread horizontally, sluggish and glossy, making a kind of fog around us. Matches were continually being struck—the drivers of auto-rickshaws lit cigarettes, adding tobacco pollution to petrol pollution. (137)

Delhi forces newcomers to the city like Ashok, a formerly innocent man during his stay in America, to become corrupt. Balram, the village lad, is also transformed.

Adiga's "coruscating and mordant wit, modulating to clear-eyed pathos" (Mukherjee) strips away the veneer of a rising India and shows Delhi to be locked in corruption, greed, inhumanity and absolute inequality. In the light of New Delhi, the moral darkness increases. As Adiga observes, "The past fifty years have seen tumultuous changes in India's society, and these changes—many of which are for the better—have overturned the traditional hierarchies, and the old securities of life. A lot of poorer Indians are left confused and perplexed by the new India that is being formed around them" ("Excerpted Interview").

Corruption pervades even Bangalore. Balram takes on the new name of Ashok Sharma. Having become the owner of fourteen vehicles, he periodically stuffs cash into brown envelopes for policemen and politicians. Although a boy is killed by a car driven by Ashok Sharma, the police do not choose to investigate the case since they sometimes receive bribes from the perpetrator of the crime. Adiga gives a good account of the Police Commissioner who often demands more money to support his son who is in the United States. Adiga thus records how language differences (Ashok Sharma is from Northern India) do not pose a barrier to bribery. The victim is warned and the culprit is let off. One's wealth decides justice.

A central motif in the novel is the Rooster Coop Syndrome from which Balram wishes to escape. Balram dwells upon a society of people complicit in their own servitude; he likens them to roosters guarding the coop, aware they are waiting for the axe, yet unwilling to escape. "Go to Old Delhi," he says,

and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire mesh cages. . . . They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (Adiga 173–74)

On another occasion Balram expresses his protest thus: "A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse" (176). The protagonist draws our attention to the "zoo law": "And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on the fifteenth of August, 1947—the day the British left—the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up and grown big bellies. That was all that counted now, the size of your belly. It did not matter whether you were

a woman or a Muslim, or an untouchable: anyone with a belly could rise up” (64). During Balram’s visit to the National Zoo in Delhi, the white tiger’s eyes meet his own, like his master’s eyes meeting his in the rearview mirror of the car. He understands that he must release himself from the trap of perpetual servitude. The white tiger within him decides “to spill a little blood’ on his way to independence” (Gregory). He considers that, “In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up” (Adiga 64). Balram adheres to “zoo law” rather than mutely serve his masters. He decides to break free from servitude.

This powerful novel projects a double vision of both rural and urban Indian life, thereby presenting an authentic view of contemporary India. Towards the end of the novel, Balram presents an optimistic note to the Chinese Prime Minister and predicts that, within Balram’s lifetime, India will emerge as an economic powerhouse and the white man will be finished: “The future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white- skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse. . . . it will be just us yellow men and brown men at the top of the pyramid, and we’ll rule the whole world” (305). Balram, a previously invisible man, is made visible, and the white tiger breaks out of his cage. His assertion of the emergence of the new India as an economic power certainly lends a modern relevance to the novel and “will please those looking for insights into contemporary India” (D’Souza).

Note

- 1 This phrase is from the Upanishadic lore of India. It compares a life of distress to a life of civilization and bliss.

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