



Arvind Adiga's "The White Tiger": A Study of the Indian Picaresque Novel of 21st Century

Dr. Manju

Associate Professor

Department of English

Aditi Mahavidyalya

University of Delhi

Abstract

This paper delves into Arvind Adiga's "The White Tiger" as a seminal work of the 21st-century Indian picaresque novel. Through the character of Balram Halwai, it explores themes of social stratification, economic disparity, and moral ambiguity in contemporary India. Adiga's narrative critiques prevailing power dynamics while revitalizing the picaresque tradition, offering a nuanced portrayal of a protagonist navigating a complex and often brutal societal landscape. By analyzing the novel's engagement with Indian cultural and historical contexts, this study illuminates Adiga's contribution to the evolution of Indian literature and his interrogation of the human condition in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Indian Literature, Picaresque Novel, Social Critique, Power Dynamics, Economic Disparities, etc

The White Tiger, Arvind Adiga's first novel, was published in 2008. With the book's depressing depiction of India as a corrupt and enslaved nation, he took a lot of heat for smearing India's reputation just as the country was rising to worldwide economic prominence. Adiga, who has been a resident of Mumbai for almost a decade, insists that the bleak portrait of India he paints in his book "is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about rather than just hearing about the 5% who are doing well. Thus, in The White Tiger, we see the unseen side of the Shining India of the new century—a world that is dark, chaotic, and amoral—a side that many people would rather not discuss. It is my contention that Adiga uses the picaresque genre in his work to expose and brutally criticise what we may presently term modern India. Américo Castro argues that readers might get a better knowledge of the society they reflect on by reading picaresque novels as a type of rebellion popular, a social protest of the poor, and a critique of the world of aristocratic luxury. In this paper, I argue that The White Tiger is best read and interpreted as a societal

satire that ultimately calls for reform, making it a picaresque book. To give a very broad definition, the picaresque is typically thought of as a fictional autobiography, the unrestricted first-person narration of a roguish protagonist named the picaro. The Picaro is an outcast willing to do anything to improve his social status. He is often a young kid who has had his innocence shattered and is now struggling to survive in a dangerous world. He learns deception and treachery from his surroundings. "The picaresque would return during days of irony and discouragement," said literary critic Claudio Guillén, and "the picaresque character is a reflection of a society undergoing profound social changes," wrote critic Angela Hague. Adiga's protagonist, Balram Halwai, travels like a picaro across the rapidly changing landscape of twenty-first-century India. Adiga's novel, like other picaresque novels like the Spanish *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), one of the genre's founding texts, is an autobiography in epistolary form, a series of letters written over the course of seven nights and addressed to the real Wen Jiabao, China's sixth premier, who served as leader of the country from 2012 until his resignation in March of that year. Balram Halwai, a parvenu in modern, globalising India, tells the story of his upbringing and rise to success as an entrepreneur in his letters. While on the road, Balram, like any good picaro, takes a cynical look at his surroundings and draws caricatures of the people he meets. Adiga gives us a fresh and terrifying image of the impacts of globalisation in his native country by giving him, a low-caste, half-baked, violent young guy, narrative authority.

Considering this route, I'd like to talk about how truthful the novel's narrator is and how the author's choice of the picaresque form aids in delivering the novel's scathing social and political satire of modern India, which is at the vanguard of an economic boom on a global scale.

Focused illumination of globalisation's flaws

Adiga wants us, Western readers, to not only rush through these sights while feeling somewhat apprehensive since they are frequent to observe on certain Indian road sides, but also, and most crucially, to pause and take stock of the situation, making them all the more meaningful.

Many of the scenes in *The White Tiger* are very similar; they all attempt to be genuine depictions of regular people, and their attention to detail about everyday settings lends the book a realistic, even socially realistic, feel. *The White Tiger* is an obvious example of the unlikely pairing of a picaresque story with social reality. The choice to describe the poor in ordinary conditions, in contrast with India's nouveau riches, aims at highlighting the

injustices of society and protesting the inequalities still firmly rooted in current Indian mentalities, muchlike the preoccupation of early twentieth-century American artists with such details.

An outgrowth of social Darwinism, neoliberalism

Since Ligia Tomoiaga notes in her new work on the picaresque that "generally, the picaresque is not the critic of just one aspect of society, as he travels from one place to another [...] he is able to present a social panorama of his age," This is a bleak scene since the world the picaresque travels through is a terrible and heartless one. According to Didier Souiller, "Man is wolf to man, and there is no other solution but to follow the pack because theft and deception are everywhere" in the first picaresque stories, In *The White Tiger*, Balram depicts a world in which humans are big-bellied animals eating up the small-bellied ones, continuing the pessimistic tone and this very idea of man harming his own kind so characteristic of 16th-century Spanish society into 21st-century post-independent India. In his mind, India before independence was a zoo in which the caste system was given central importance: the Halwais prepared sweets, the cowherds cared for the cows, and the untouchables cleaned the faeces. But now, "the cages had been let loose [...] and jungle rule substituted zoo law. The fiercest and hungriest among them had consumed all of the weaker ones and developed enormous stomachs, so now they were the ones in a position to lead. These days, society is divided into simply two groups of men: the big-bellied and the skinny-bellied. With just two possible outcomes: eat or be eaten. (64) Balram's family landowners in Laxmangarh, his birthplace, are big-bellied prey. The buffalo, the rooster, the stork, and the wild boar, all given animal names, eat everyone in the village because they control the taxation of the commons. Adiga's satirical depiction of social Darwinism, a perverted version of Darwin's principle of "survival of the fittest," is exemplified by the idea of two classes, the eat-or-be-eaten. The narrator's keen intellect and cynical outlook allow him to remark on Indian culture with an exaggerated, satirical, and sometimes erroneous perspective, painting a picture of a nation descending into a condition of unequalled primitivism and bestiality. Adiga critiques not only the global economic system and its major players but also the masses, whom he says are largely to blame for their own abject poverty and misery.

If the poor are like chickens, then the affluent are like pigs, and it is their fate to fatten the pigs through their labour. The sight of hens pecking at one another and squelching about in their own excrement without making any attempt to flee reveals a reality we dare not fathom from our comfortable, "normal," conventional vantage point. Adiga is very critical of the exploiter's willing participation in their own exploitation, a feeling of servitude so perplexing that it must result not just from the biological rules of "natural selection" but also from continual, meticulously

crafted social engineering. In fact, as Balram tells us, "the desire to be a servant had been bred into [him]: hammered into [his] skull nail after nail, and poured into [his] blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga" (193). He used to be one of the silent, ignorant poor, but he was able to cause enough of a ripple in society to work his way into the middle class. Balram will plant the seed of his rebellion because of the yawning gap between the haves and the have-nots; he will decide to become an eater rather than a victim. Balram, the picaro, now publicly plays the role of a rogue and swindler, swindling his owner at every turn so that he might become a social entrepreneur.

The ascent of a "no-name," or the rebirth of the "picaro,

A list of common picaresque themes and motifs is provided by Ulrich Wicks in his work, *The Nature of the Picaresque Narrative*. Of them, he says, "metamorphoses and changing roles are part of the picaro's survival kit—as the world is in flux, he can change roles to face it. This is a reference to the common role-playing motif. By the end of the story, Balram Halwai has lived up to all of his titles, each of which conjures up a distinct state and territory of cultural hegemony. He's a plot device for showing the subaltern's journey out of the shadows and into the light, both physically and metaphorically. His haphazard travel plan begins at a dirty riverside hamlet in rural India, near the Ganga. In the "India of Darkness," he is only one of the many anonymous people that go by the "boy" name of Munna. His teacher gives him the name Balram, and a school inspector gives him the moniker White Tiger as a compliment to his intelligence just before he is expelled from school and forced to work in a tea shop like other youngsters of his low caste in India. The white tiger is really a unique creature, distinguished from other tigers by its absence of the orange pigment that gives the species its typical appearance. For Balram, "it only comes along once in a generation" (35), as he puts it in the book. Balram doesn't realise how special it is until he moves to Delhi, a fake city where only the most vicious and ruthless predators can thrive. Interestingly, as he becomes more immersed in the corrupt lifestyle of Delhi, his master, Ashok, starts to feel weaker and more despondent. The White Tiger progressively sheds his old servant's skin, slowly undermining the well-established order of the master-servant relationship, and he becomes more fully realised the more lost his master becomes. Balram, a born underdog, murders his innocent owner in order to steal his money and exploit his good reputation to launch a successful company in his own right. Through this act of criminality and the theft of his master's identity, he, the subaltern, obtains power and renown and proves that it is possible to escape what he humorously refers to as "the rooster coop" in India in the twenty-first century, a country that is rapidly modernising and becoming more integrated into the global economy. Although Balram's story is one of rags-to-riches success, it is not meant to be a celebration of the

triumph of the underdog. Instead, it should be seen as a scathing condemnation of India's new affluent class of business owners. Adiga uses the phrase early on, explaining that Balram's letters to the Chinese Premier are meant to acquaint him with the concept. The novel's scathingly ironic tone is immediately apparent. When Balram writes:

“Apparently Sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs”

(Adiga, 4).

This is a crucial idea in the modern, globally integrated economy. A big concept in *The White Tiger* becomes insulting once it is questioned. Balram goes

on to tell the prime minister that his story exemplifies the way in which the magnificent human race has entered the 21st century via the birth of entrepreneurship. Despite their years of formal education, he believes he is superior to the fully grown men, who are still dependent on others for guidance due to their mixed heritage and lack of self-sufficiency. Adiga vehemently criticises neoliberalism at the book's finale, when Balram realises his goals in Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley. As a result, the city is painted as a cesspool of crooked bureaucracy and unrelenting financial speculation, where only the most tenacious and resourceful businesspeople and officials can succeed in a competitive market. Here in Bangalore, the deadly Balram uses his victim's stolen money to launch his own successful limousine business. By adopting his master's name, Ashok Sharma is able to flourish in the modern market economy by adopting the same level of ruthlessness that is required of everyone else. Finally, he joins the ranks of the Men with Big Bellies, the new elite, or "a solid pillar of Bangalorean society" (292), as he puts it. From this vantage point, however, Balram's independence is really an illusion. Not only does he wrongfully assume his old boss's identity, but he also mimics his political grafting, money laundering, and bribes. His entrepreneurial decisions and activities are still being forced upon him from the outside, thus confining him to a gilded cage rather than a rooster coop. The same conclusion might be reached by analysing Balram's voyage from a picaresque perspective. The ultimate goal of the picaro is social acceptance and upward mobility. But he never succeeds and stays a "half-outsider," a person without friends or family. While what Balram does is undeniably a remarkable financial accomplishment, he also pays a terrible price for it. He may have succeeded as a "first-gear man" (319), a wealthy businessman, and a "master of drivers" (302), but he is still a lonely man with "no friends" (302), no living relatives, and no morals. He's made it into the brightly coloured, desirable world that modern India paints, only to discover that the affluent there

aren't any more enlightened than the rest of us despite their hundreds of chandeliers.

Conclusion

The White Tiger's core emphasis and argument is the debunking of the myths surrounding neoliberalism. The work is a scathing, caustic, and cynical critique of the economy, society, and politics, and the societal picture that Balram paints is very pessimistic. Adiga's effort to recast the position of the subaltern subject is mirrored in her decision to provide Balram with the authority of an autodiegetic narrator. As such, *The White Tiger* might be seen as an affirmative answer to Gayatri Spivak's famously provocative question, "Can the Subaltern speak"? (Morris, 2009). When interpreting the book in this way, it is important to remember that the picaro, in addition to being the narrator, is a master manipulator, and that his perspective will unavoidably colour the plot. This results in a very biased, skewed, and subjective perspective being presented to the reader. Considering the narrator's background—he is a murderer and an ignorant rural migrant who portrays himself as a wealthy businessman—is important here. Despite being afforded the right to speak, his poor social standing and criminal background make him seem to be an unreliable and untrustworthy spokesperson. Adiga uses this persona as a satirical tool to poke fun at neoliberalism by putting the tools of power (language and business success) in his hands. In the book, he uses the killer narrator's common and sarcastic vocabulary to lampoon society. Adiga's modern picaresque story calls into question the optimism and hope of the Shining India, so praised for its economic achievements, by using Balram's parodic imitation of his employers (the entrepreneurial elite) and their values and corrupted money as venture capital and by unfolding and harshly denouncing the new market society's flaws, failings, and injustices.

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