

# A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

**D.N.P. Prema Ponmani**

Assistant Professor of English  
East Point Group of Institutions, Bangalore.  
Email id : [premaponmani@gmail.com](mailto:premaponmani@gmail.com)

---

## **Abstract**

*This paper explores the social issues of contemporary India. The novel *The White Tiger* projects a clear picture of contemporary society. It highlights the struggle and exploitation of the common and poor strata of society in India. It is a realistic novel reflecting the burning issues of class, caste and religion in the society. It focuses on exploitation and discrimination of the marginalized sections of the society. It deals with major socio-cultural issues such as poverty, hunger, corruption, violence, terrorism and suffering of people in India. *The White Tiger* is the story of the protagonist Balram who aspires to become an entrepreneur as a result of his growing need for financial security of his family. He is the representative of lower class. He addresses the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao through a series of seven letters. The main theme of the novel is based on the contrast between India's rise as modern global economy and its extremely pathetic condition of middle-class working people. It is a painful and realistic picture of modern India. Arvind Adiga highlights his message that the marginalized are waiting for their betterment and upliftment of life. The present study was under taken to explore the social issues of contemporary India in Adiga's *The White Tiger*.*

**Keywords:** *Class, caste, exploitation, marginalized, and entrepreneur.*

Literature is the mirror of society and Arvind Adiga in his novel *The White Tiger* reflects the social issues in India. This novel is his first Man-Booker Prize winner novel written in an epistolary style. It depicts the postmodern ambiguities and it was set in rural Bihar, New Delhi and its suburban city Gurgaon. It portrays the life of an anti-hero Balram who represents the downtrodden section of India. In spite of its claims as a booming economy, India is not shining and still it is in darkness. Moovendhan writes,

The fiction depicts the journey of Indian society from aspirations to disillusionment by focusing on vital socio-cultural issues of national importance such as poverty, hunger, corruption, violence, fanaticism, terrorism, and child-labour and so on. It also deals with economic, political and social exploitation and discrimination of the weaker, marginalized sections on the basis of caste, class, gender and religion. (Moovendhan, 2019, p.337)

In this novel Balram wrote a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. He narrated the story of his life over seven nights. He was born in a village in North India, as a son of a rickshaw puller. When he was in school his parents sent him to work in a tea-shop. Then he was hired as a chauffeur by a village landlord. Then he continued his journey to Delhi where after murdering his employer, he finally became a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore. Vandana Pathak writes, “The novel describes his trajectory from darkness to light, from Laxmangarh to Delhi and Bangalore and in the process, traces his quest for identity, from a ‘country Mouse’ to a ‘White Tiger’” (Pathak, 2008, p.61).

The novel brings out a startling contrast between India’s rise as a global economy and the plight of the marginalized class of society who are living in overwhelming rural and urban poverty. Adiga deals with various ills affecting our society and provides examples of malpractices happening in Indian democracy. It is a social criticism focusing on the poverty and misery of India and its socio-political conflicts. Liberty and equality are two major benefits of democracy. These two vital aspects of human life are influential in the development and enlightenment. But there are innumerable evil forces that destroy human liberty and equality. Corruption is one of the fatal evils that exist in the society.

In this novel Laxmangarh is Adiga’s imaginative village, where the people were subjected to exploitation, torture and torment by the village landlord. Balram started receiving his primary education from his village. The teacher recognized his potential and called him Balram. His parents called him Muna which means boy. The school inspector called him ‘White Tiger’ by appreciating his smartness and brilliance. Balram was ambitious by nature and tried to improve his social position. That motivated him to go to Delhi as the driver of one of the landlord’s westernized son Ashok. In Delhi, Balram felt the gap between rich and poor and between two castes. Men with big bellies and men with the small bellies, those who eat and those who are eaten. All such social, political and economic disparities gradually instill in Balram’s mind the spirit of revolt, resistance and vengeance. These motives remained suppressed for years in Balram’s unconscious mind and inspired him to resist and improve his subordinate condition.

Adiga gives a realistic picture of our nation and its classes, Adiga writes, “Please understand, you’re Excellency, 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” (Adiga, 2008, p.14). Also he pictures the reality of village in India. “Electricity poles – defunct. Water tap -- broken. Children -- too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India” (2008,

p.19-20). This is the real picture of a typical Indian village. There are electricity poles without the supply of electricity. The water taps are broken and without water. Children are starving without the basic necessity and suffer due to malnutrition. Thus Balram picturizes the condition of village in India.

Balram's father is a rickshaw puller and an honest man. He himself says "He is a man of honour and courage" (Adiga, 2008, p.23). But he was not honored by the society. He says, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. Adiga writes, "They (the rickshaw puller) were not allowed to sit on the plastic chairs put out for the customers; they had to crouch near the back, in that hunched-over, squatting posture common to servants in every part of India" (2008, 24). But he wanted his son to be treated like a man.

Balaram describes the life of rickshaw pullers. They became very weak and unhealthy by pulling and pedaling the rickshaw. His own father died of tuberculosis. Adiga writes, ". . . thin, sticklike men, leaning forward from the seat of bicycle, as they pedal along a carriage bearing a pyramid of middle-class flesh -- some fat man with his fat wife and all their shopping bags and groceries" (2008, p.27).

In this novel, Balram as a subaltern became a mouthpiece of numerous marginalized poverty stricken Indians. Adiga portrayed how the low caste people are treated by the high caste people. Through this novel we could understand that how pathetic the predicament would have been for the villagers. High class used their status to dominate the lower one. Balram gave voice to his oppressed, abused and exploited brethren. Krishna Singh points out, "Adiga has successfully highlighted the subaltern issue in the novel and brought home the idea that in the story of India's progress role of the underclass is important. He as a communist manifesto, pleads strongly for the classless society"(Singh,2009,p.111)

The story began from Bihar and ended in Bangalore, symbolically from darkness to light exposing two different culture, society and professional. Adiga tells the shocking, apparently amoral story of a young man who brutally murdered his employer and got away with it. Adiga explicitly portrayed how caste and religion are important factors in shaping the life of an individual in the society. Balram was asked about his caste before being employed as a driver. He quickly said that he was a halwai by caste and he was capable of making sweets and got the job. Adiga exposes the fact that there is an unequal distribution of wealth and lack of human rights in the society.

Balram narrates an incident where a landlord's son from his village was kidnapped by the naxalite. Unable to find the kidnappers, the landlord had shown all his frustration and anger at the servant who was the caretaker of his son. That servant was tortured and later shot dead. His entire family was brutally killed and his house was set on fire. All these incidents inspired him to get freedom from oppression and poverty. The humiliation and discrimination that he suffered silently ended in his most shocking action of murdering his master.

Balram was born in a poverty stricken lower class. He experienced all the tormenting experiences both as a child as well as a grown up man. He realised that discrimination between the rich and the poor is not only in the village but also in metropolitan city like Delhi. Such inhuman treatment in the hands of the rich man renders the heart of a poor man. In one such situation he asks the question: "Am I not a human being too?" (p.148). Vinita

Singh Chawdhry writes, “The work offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of modern India. The social novels encapsulate the pain, humiliation and poverty of this community which has lived at the bottom of India’s social pyramid for millennium” (Chawdhry, 2014, 234).

Balram was aware of the conflict between the rich and the poor. He is conscious of the fact that there is a little chance for the poor to overcome the rich. Balram is presented as a modern Indian hero. Ashok spent a lot of time in visiting malls, along with Pinky Madam, his wife. Balram’s job was to carry all the shopping bags. The mean and stingy behavior of the rich is shown through the lost coin episode. Mongoose insulted Balram for not having regained a rupee coin he lost while getting out of car. He was very much bothered about the lost one rupee coin after bribing someone with a million rupees. Adiga writes,

‘Get down on your knees, Look for it on the floor of the car.’ I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee. ‘What do you mean, it’s not there? Don’t think you can steal from us just because you’re in the city. I want that rupee.’ ‘We’ve just paid half a million rupees in a bribe, now we’re screwing this man over for a single rupee . . . Where that rupee coin went remains a mystery to me this day, Mr Premier Finally, I took a rupee coin out of my shirt pocket, dropped it on the floor of the car, picked it up, and gave it to the Mongoose. (Adiga, 2008, p.139) Balram had different experiences in Delhi. One day heavily drunk Madam, while driving the car, hit a person on the road. He was persuaded to confess that he had hit a man while driving rash in the night. Thus he was compelled to take the blame on him for an act which he had not done. This is not only the story of Balram but also of many poor people. They sacrificed their lives for their rich masters in return of money for their family.

In another incident, Ashok bribed ministers to get the contracts of coal mines. “He made me go from one bank to another bank . . . he was collecting money from the automatic cash machines – four different ones . . .” (2008, p.211). At last one day Balram took advantage of Ashok’s faith and trust in him. He killed him with an empty whisky bottle. He climbed the ladder of success by murdering Mr Ashok, and stole his bag of money Rs. 700,000/- based on a philosophy of revenge, ambition and corruption.

Balram escaped to Bangalore along with his cousin Dharam. There he changed his name Ashok Sharma, started a taxi company and became a wealthy entrepreneur in India’s most technologically advanced metropolitan city. He is not only an entrepreneur but also a roguish criminal, capable of self-justification. Murder of Ashok by Balram is a result of deep-rooted frustration of underclass experiencing the separation between the upper class and lower class. Wankhede writes, “The voice of Balram seems to be a new India . . . The protagonist even justifies his employer’s murder as an act of class rivalry making ‘The White Tiger’ a discriminating piece of social commentary, accustomed to the inequalities that continue despite India’s new prosperity” (2004, p.135).

Adiga boldly describes the internal affairs of political parties, bribe, black-mailing and corruption etc. Mr. Ashok visited Delhi to solve his tax problem regarding coal mines. The rich people always make a visit to Delhi in order to settle their black money. But the poor and downtrodden goes in search of light for better life. Here Adiga describes the conditions of slum people. “The poor bastards had come from Darkness to Delhi to find some

light – but they were still in the darkness” (2008, p.138).

Through all these instances Adiga portrays the dark image of India. Balram’s Father died of tuberculosis because he could not go to the specialist hospital in city. Patients were neglected by doctors in government hospitals. Balram’s father was not treated properly. He was coughing and spitting the blood, “. . . my father was permanently cured of his tuberculosis. The ward boys made us clean up after Father before we could remove the body. A goat came in and sniffed as we were mopping the blood off the floor” (Adiga, 2008, p.50-51).

Adiga through this novel made the people to realize how the large number of poor people have been suffering in the country. Life on this earth seems to be a curse to them. The rich have been enjoying the fruit of the scientific and economic development of the nation. The condition of poor has become worse in every walk of life. Priyanka Pasari writes, “*The White Tiger* is a novel born in that infinitesimal moment of darkness. And as a debut, it marks the arrival of a storyteller who strikes a fine balance between the sociology of the wretched place he has chosen as home and the twisted humanism of the outcast” (Pasari, 2015, p.2).

The novelist is contemptuous at the poor quality of education which is the main cause for the poor to remain poor. Quality of education refers to the education offered in the most committed manner from the knowledgeable teachers who enhance the student’s creativity, intelligence and discipline. This may be possible only in a conducive atmosphere where the basic necessity of a class room are provided. Many students in rural area, study in a school which lacks basic infrastructure and less committed teachers.

India described by Adiga is “Two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness” (2008, p.14). The India of Light constitutes wealth, technology, power and knowledge depicted after Balram reached Delhi and later Bangalore. The India of Dark is characterized by corruption, class and caste division, misery and illiteracy etc. Adiga used ‘darkness’ as a metaphor for corruption in India. While they tried to bribe the government officials, Balram described his journey,

I was taking my particular dark egg (meaning car) right into the heart of the city. To my left I saw the domes of the President’s House . . . When the air pollution is really bad, the building is completely blotted out from the road . . . It was getting dark when the two brothers came out of the building (after bribing) . . . Mr. Ashok was dark and sullen when he got in. (Adiga 2008, p. 134-136).

Arvind Adiga, as a writer of the post-colonial period exposed his readers the stark realities of the world under the effects of Globalization. His novel reflects the true colour of Indiansocial ethos. Kumar and Surjit Singh write,

Rise of materialism, advancement of technology, materialization, social mobility, sense of cut throat competition, disloyalty, change in the norms of social institution, alienation, extent of urbanization, globalization, consumerism, and so on are some of the characteristics which constitute the mode of a new generation, causing changes in the psyche of the man of the new era. (Kumar & Surjit Singh 2014, p.220)

It is the story of a man who climbs the ladder of success. It exposes various evil systems like riots in election, unemployment, poverty, corruption, misuse of welfare schemes. Adiga dares

to explore the horrible reality of India. It is set in the background of economic boom in India that resulted in great gap between the haves and have not. Archana Bhattacharjee in her Introduction to *Reflection of Social Ethos In the selected Novels of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga* writes, "Globalization has accelerated the economic growth of the country but it has also widened the rich-poor gap. It portrays a satirical picture of class struggle in India. It is a brilliant and unflinching vision of modern India" (Adiga, 2016, p.53).

The glorious images that appear about modern India are that of the rising economic, scientific and political power in the world scenario. But in this situation the rule makers failed to see the sufferings of the downtrodden. Marginalized people are discriminated, ignored and often suppressed on the basis of race, gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economy. Raymond Williams remarks, "In a class-society there are primarily inequalities between classes. Gramsci therefore introduced the necessary recognition of dominance and subordination in what has still, however, to be recognized as a whole process" (Williams, 1977, p.108). In order to get emancipation in social, cultural, economic and educational terms, India must make sure to provide good quality education and uplift the living condition of the majority of the poor.

Aravind Adiga has become the most successful writer with his thoughtful creation *The White Tiger*. This study about the contemporary social issues in this novel has attempted to find out in a sociological perspective that how his novel has been a deep concern for society. Sanjay Kumar and Surit Singh writes, "The novelist (Adiga) wants to convey the message that it is the poison of casteism, communalism, regionalism, discrimination on social, economic basis etc. which are the obstacles in the way of progress" (Singh, 2014, p.231).

### References

- Adiga, Aravind. (2008). *The White Tiger*. India: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Bhattacharjee, Archana. (2016). Introduction. *Reflection of Social Ethos In the selected Novels of Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga*. India: Authors Press, 19-55.
- Chawdhary, Vinita Singh. (2014). Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: Injustice and Poverty in the Present Scenario. *The Criterion*, 5(3), 229-235.
- Kumar, Sanjay & Surjit Singh. (2014). Aravind Adiga as a Novelist of the New Generation. *Language In India*, 14(11), 220-232.
- Moovendhan, (2019). Social-critical Analysis of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, Between the Assassination and Last Man in Tower. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 6(3), 337-342.
- Pathak, Vandana. (2004). The Marginalized Psyche in 'The White Tiger': A Sociological Perspective. Nimsarkar & Shubha Mishra, (Eds.), *Aravind Adiga an Anthology of Critical Essays*. (59-68). New Delhi: Creative Books.
- Pasari, Priyanka. (2015). 'The White Tiger' On Half Baked India and Social and Political Deterioration. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 20(5), 01-06.
- Singh, Krishna. (2009). Aravind Adiga's 'The White Tiger': The Voice of Underclass – A Postcolonial Dialectics. *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies*. 1(2), 98-112.

*Wankhede, M.S. (2004). Aravind Adiga's 'The White Tiger': A Historiography of Indian Culture and Society. Nimsarkar & Shubha Mishra (Eds.), Aravind Adiga an Anthology of Critical Essays.*

*(124-142). New Delhi: Creative Books.*

*Williams, Raymond. (1977). Marxism and Literature. Oxford: Oxford University Press.*

---

---

#### **Author's Bio-note**

D.N.P. Prema Ponmani is Assistant Professor of English in East Point Group of Institutions, Bangalore. She has seven years of teaching experience. She submitted her Ph.D. thesis in the School of English and Foreign Languages, Gandhigram Rural Institute (Deemed to be University) under the guidance of Prof. A. Joseph Dorairaj (Deen) Tamil Nadu. She attended National and International Conferences and presented her research articles. Her articles are published in international Journals. Her broad area of research is Indian Writing in English. "The Existentialist Predicament of Women Characters in the novels of Manju Kapur's Novels – A Critical Study" is her Ph.D topic.

---