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An Analysis of the Novel the White Tiger with respect to Caste and Class Politics

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ABSTRACT

When man started to think and human endeavour on communication of his thoughts started, literature came into being. With time various genres and modes of literary thoughts emerged in the world. Literature tried to convey messages in a very creative way garnering audiences to understand real life emotions and behavioural patterns. In such a way the Indian novel the White Tiger by Arvind Adiga talks about the class and caste divisions in India and how it continues to impact social life in India even after almost six decades of independence. The novel portrays class and caste politics with how even though India being world's largest democracy still lags at various aspects of democracy and liberty in real life. In this work I would like to analyse the novel White Tiger with respect to how it portrays the caste and class consciousness as well as how these elements plays a crucial role in India's social setting at the backdrop of poverty and underdevelopment in the rural areas of our country.

Keywords: Class, Caste, Indian society, Poverty, Gross Enrollment Ratio, Fiction.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has a lot of role to play in the history of mankind. Humans had always tried to express, portray and record something. Since, there is no end to human endeavour; humans tried various and different methodologies to express themselves. Thus, in a way literature was formed to convey their messages. The novel White Tiger by Arvind Adiga is one of such literary work which conveyed a strong message to our country and its citizens regarding the state of our nation. Our Nation India, stands at its 76th year of independence and 74th year of Republic respectively. But, have we achieved really achieved the ideals that inspired for our freedom struggle. This stands as one of the critical questions that ponder over every citizen of this country while undertaking his or her constitutional and national duty. Have we achieved what has been guaranteed by our Constitution as Fundamental Liberties and the goals of a good governance as Directive Principles of State Policy is a question that arises continually from this point of view as well. All these questions were answered in a dark way by the literary work of Arvind Adiga titled "The White Tiger". This novel proves literature one of the mightiest tool

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that can be used to portray real life themed in a fictional background and setting. In this paper I would like to do an analysis on the fictional novel *The White Tiger*, to showcase how the novel addresses caste and class divide in Indian society even in modern age and how there is an unequal socio – economic development in India as a part of Urban – Rural Divide.

II. SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL

The Novel *White Tiger* was authored by Arvind Adiga who is an Indian writer. This work of Adiga earned him the 2008 Man Booker Prize leading to fame. As a Synopsis this novel centres around the life of Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel. The novel starts with the news of Wen Jiabo, the real life Premier of People’s Republic of China from 2003 to 2013 visiting Bangalore and Balram being a business tycoon of Bangalore City. The novel is in an autobiographical tone where Balram Halwai writes a letter to Wen Jiabo as the Chinese leader is very much anxious to know about the “Truth” about Bangalore as he wants to know about the success of Indian entrepreneurs. Balram says that he is the only one who knows the truth about the city. Balram starts to say his life story as his story portrays a story of a successful businessman that Jiabo wants to know.

Balram was born in a small village of Laxmangarh in Bihar district of Gaya. He was born in a poor family consisting of his bedridden mother, hard working father who is a rickshaw puller, an elder brother named Kishan, his grandmother Kusum and his uncles and aunts. Balram starts by narrating the episode of his mother’s death and her funerary rites at Banaras. Balram was taken out of school and made to work with his brother in order to pay his cousin sister’s dowry for her marriage. After his father’s death he moves to Dhanbad where he works along with his brother and later learns driving. Balram starts to search for work as a driver and finds one in the residence of Stork, who is a wealthy landlord of his village. Stork appoints him second to his senior driver Ram Prasad. But, Balram comes to know that Ram Prasad is a Muslim and he is removed from job once he says this to stork as the household only employs Hindus. Now, Balram becomes the driver for the Stork’s son Ashok and his wife Pinky and moves to Delhi.

In Delhi he meets with another fellow driver named whom he refers as Vitiligo. One night on the day of Pinky’s birthday, Pinky gets the car control from Balram and drives rashly leading to death of a small girl who is living in pavements. The family members of Ashok including his father Stork and his eldest son Mongoose make Balram sign papers to make sure Pinky is released from the crime and Balram made the convict. But, later the need for such a thing is eliminated with Ashok and his family paying some amount of cash as bribe to police and family members of the dead girl. Ashok starts increasingly to bribe politicians in Delhi for their family

business and Pinky leaves Ashok to US.

Balram kills Ashok to escape his life as a servant and runs away with money to pay politicians accompanied by his nephew whom Kusum had sent earlier to Balram. He eventually starts a taxi business in Bangalore and becomes a tycoon. Balram is pretty sure that his family members would be killed by the Stork in place for the freedom he had achieved. Balram bribes the family of a person killed by his taxi driver with promises of a job to the brother of the dead person. He ends his story with the realization that he has found the real freedom he had craved and that his tale is a testament to the power of adversity.

III. AN ANALYSIS ON THE MESSAGE THAT THE WHITE TIGER DELIVERS

The White Tiger as a literary piece brilliantly delivers a strong message to Indian society regarding the still living concept of caste and class consciousness in India. The novel premises upon the theme of how a person from normal rural Indian background can live his life and what is the fate of a person born in such a background throughout his life. The name of the protagonist itself comes along with a caste surname as Balram “Halwai” showcasing the dominance of caste hierarchy in various parts of India. For the purpose of my analysis, I would like to take two specific terminologies from the novel which expresses the ideas of this novel, “Half – Baked” and “Rooster Coop”. The terminology “Half – baked ones” shows India’s system of people from lower strata of society who has incomplete educations with incomplete informations sticking to their mind.

The All India Survey on Higher Education for the year 2021 – 22 states that “The estimated Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education for the age group 18-23 years in India is 28.4. For Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students, the GER is 25.9 and 21.2 respectively”². As per the Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) Report of 2021 – 22, the gross enrollment ratio in primary level is 103.4%, 94.7% in upper primary level, 79.6% in secondary level and 57.6% in senior secondary level opposed to total dropout rate in Primary level was 1.5%, 3.3% in upper primary level and 12.6% in secondary level out of the total enrolled in each of these three levels. Even though the government initiatives have reduced the dropout rates, still we have not achieved a decent ratio in higher education enrollment. The story of Balram being snatched of his educational opportunity is one such case of a dropout because of economic challenges in rural families. Moreover, the decreasing amount of enrollment ration from primary level to secondary level is an indicator

² Page 32, Chapter 2.3 – Gross Enrollment Ratio in Higher Education (18 – 23 years), All India Survey on Higher Education (2021 – 22), Ministry of Education, Department of Higher Education, Delhi.

where we can understand that persons like Balram were enrolled in primary level but, wasn't able to complete their school education.

This is indicated with the steep down from 79.6% enrollment ratio in secondary level to 57.6% in senior secondary level to the Gross Enrollment Ratio (indicating enrollment of students in higher education) being just a mere 28.4%. Ashok, Balram's boss at one occasion says that India is filled of such "half – baked" people with whom democracy can't be trusted³. It is true as the enrollment ratio states people from rural and dark side of the India that the author portrays does'nt able to comprehend the value of democracy. It is not that rural people are not intelligent and not worthy of democracy. But, the novel portrays their naivety and how village people are tricked by politicians to swing in their favour by making promises which they never do. This is evident through the episode of Balram's father being taken to a hospital for treating tuberculosis in a near village where they could find large rock edicts stating that so and so leader has laid the foundation for health center. But, even though the construction of the hospital is over there is no doctor as the post of government doctor is used to be auctioned off which goes upto Four Lakh Rupees sometimes⁴. This shows that even the promises of politicians didn't help the rural poor as they are cheated of their votes as the politicians are busy in corruption and developing their own wealth and the wealth re – distribution which is one of the aims of the "Great Socialist" being a socialist is itself has been not implemented as the leader himself is the one who is acting in a way opposing this aim.

The second terminology is "rooster coop". The rooster coop is a metaphor used by Adiga to express Balram's situation of being caught in a vicious circle of poverty intertwined with class and caste barrier. Balram says that this country's greatest invention in ten thousand years in its history is this "Rooster Coop". Balram explains that when a rooster is picked up from the coop to be slaughtered the other roosters watch those, smell those and can also feel it. But, they don't try to escape the coop eventhough they now that they are the next. Similarly an Indian servant from a low class will never cheat his master eventhough at times he acts as an agent and gets

³ "The thing is, he probably has...what, two, three years of schooling in him? He can read and write, but he doesn't get what he's read. He's half-baked. The country is full of people like him, I'll tell you that. And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy"—he pointed at me—"to characters like these. That's the whole tragedy of this country."

Page 10, *The First Night, The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga(24th impression, 2018, Harpercollins Publishers, India).

⁴ "See, it's like this," the older Muslim man said. "There's a government medical superintendent who's meant to check that doctors visit village hospitals like this. Now, each time this post falls vacant, the Great Socialist lets all the big doctors know that he's having an open auction for that post. The going rate for this post is about four hundred thousand rupees these days."

Page 49, *The Second Night, The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga (24th impression, 2018, Harpercollins Publishers, India).

lumps of money. But, he safely returns to his master. This is because he is caught up in a rooster coop. The reason is if he does something like this his master won't spare his family and this is the reason why all the masters knew about each and every member of a servant's family. Balram metamorphically tries to the coop but, he knows that his family won't be spared. The escape he did was by killing his boss Ashok and fleeing away with his money.

The rooster coop shows the class divisions of India which is again connected to the caste hierarchy of India. The novel shows that the caste system in rural villages and class hierarchy at rural are congruent are of similar nature. This is evident as whoever meets Balram first, they enquire his caste first. Balram learns driving from an old driver who believes Halwai's are not worthy of driving due to their business of sweets and blood aggression, suggesting only Sikhs, Rajputs, and Muslims are worthy of driving.

Even when Balram goes to the house of Stork, the first question they ask is "What caste are you of? Top or Bottom?". According to a report of Times of India, Additional Solicitor General of India, Balbir Singh reported to the Supreme Court of India that out of a workforce of 1,23,155 there is only a representation of 15.34% of Scheduled Castes, 6.18% of Scheduled Tribes and 17.15% of Other Backward Classes in government jobs of 19 ministries⁵. This implies that even today people from oppressed sections of the society still now find it hard to be represented in a decent light of the society. Thus, it makes us clear that through the novel even caste divisions still exist in occupations with a similar thought expressed by the old driver.

Balram says that maybe the older caste system could have disappeared but, at today's world there are only two castes – One with big bellies and another with small bellies. This indicates the class divisions of India in both rural and urban areas more rampant than caste barriers. Starting from Laxmangarh village to Dhanbad To India's capital Delhi. Balram being from the lower class or in his language belonging to a caste of "small bellies" is deprived of education because of being in a vicious circle of poverty which is directly arising because of the class system. As illustrated in the novel we can see various instances where "class" plays a larger role. In one such episode Balram notices with other drivers a poor man with no sandals being sent out of the mall. The man tries to protest and even asks "Am I not a human too". The other drivers appreciate this. Balram one day enters the mall with a White T Shirt with only one word in it. Eventhough the security did'nt stop him, Balram is afraid that he may be humiliated as he

⁵ "Presence of SC's, ST's in Government jobs still inadequate, Centre tells Supreme Court", An Article by Amit Anand Choudhary, October 7, 2021 < <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/presence-of-scs-sts-in-govt-jobs-still-inadequate-centre-tells-supreme-court/articleshow/86822033.cms>> accessed on 15th March, 2023 at 22.01 PM.

is just a paid driver. This implies that still people judge individuals by their appearance and through this they are also being judged as being belonging to particular strata of the society. The author is silent about the financial status and background of the “person with no sandals”. The recurring question is what if that person was financially sound.

Incidents of such class discrimination are prevalent in Indian society. For India’s G20 meet the slum area of Delhi was barricaded with tall green opaque screens and walls. One person named Saroja Devi mentioned “They have covered our area so that poor people like us, and poverty in the country, is not witnessed by the people arriving from abroad.....When it is election time, every politician comes to see us. They eat with us and make promises. But today, they are ashamed of our presence”.⁶ This implies as Balram and Adiga implies in the novel the White Tiger, Class divisions are well present in Indian society.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the novel the White Tiger we can find that the novel portrayed the dark truth of India’s caste and class divisions. The Novel openly shows that even after 74 years of our Constitutional guarantee to end discrimination and proclamation of equality still at various parts of this country people are being discriminated on caste, class and communal grounds. Being a fiction the White Tiger portrays the field status of Indian rural life as well as urban life, thus being a unique work which covers both the walks of life unless focusing on one. The character of Balram was a unique one who tries to escape his fate which is most unlikely in real life. Every human has his right to be free and live with dignity and to be free from the rooster coop. Thus, I would like to conclude that the novel white tiger had portrayed the class and caste politics in a satirical way presenting to the viewers in a literary form to think and ponder over the real situation of India.

⁶ ‘Ashamed of our Presence: Delhi glasses over plight of poor as it rolls out G20 red carpet, An Article by the Guardian, Aakash Hassan and Hannah – Ellis – Peterson, published on 8th September, 2023. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/08/ashamed-of-our-presence-delhi-glosses-over-plight-of-poor-as-it-rolls-out-g20-red-carpet>>, accessed on 15th March, 2024 at 22.34 PM.

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