

Social Consciousness in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***Dr. Waghmare Balkrishna Dada**

Krantiagrani G. D. Bapu Lad Mahavidyalaya, Kundal.

Tal. - Palus, Dist – Sangli. Maharashtra.

(Affiliated to Shivaji University Kolhapur)

Abstract:

Social consciousness is a response to social injustice experienced by the individual or in the lives of others around the individual. Aravind Adiga takes the huge responsibility of highlighting all the "brutal injustices" of India in this novel such as feudal society, caste discrimination, exploitation of Dalits and poor, the dark side of child-labour, pitiable condition of the Indian servants and humiliation at hands of their masters, and corruption and bribery at every level etc.

Key Words: consciousness, social evils, social consciousness

Consciousness is a basic concept in Philosophy, Sociology, and Psychology. It denotes the capacity for the ideal reproduction of reality, as well as the specific mechanisms and forms at various levels of this process. It is defined as an awareness of the self and the environment. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines consciousness as, "the state of being able to use your senses and mental powers to understand what is happening, the state of being aware of, awareness; the ideas and opinions of a person or group". 'When the consciousness is related with society, it becomes social consciousness. It is a consciousness shared within a society' (Scott). It can also be defined as social awareness; i.e. being aware of the problems that different societies and communities face on a day-to-day basis and being conscious of the difficulties and hardships of society. It is believed that social consciousness is a response to social injustice experienced by the individual or in the lives of others around the individual.

The White Tiger is Aravind Adiga's debut novel. He won the 2008 Bookers Prize for this novel. After Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai, he is the fourth Indian-born author to win the prize. The novel is presented in an epistolary form. It gives the account of the life of Balram Halwai. Along with it, it also presents the progress of India and simultaneously records the social evils existed in

the Indian society. Aravind Adiga who is socially conscious writer makes his intention clear behind writing this novel. He says in his interview with Stuart Jeffries, in 'The Guardian' the day after he won the Man Booker Prize for this novel:

"At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination" (Jeffries).

Here the writer takes the huge responsibility of highlighting all the "brutal injustices" of India. We can trace similarity between Dicken's *David Copperfield* and Adiga's *The White Tiger*. He has tried to show social evils of Indian society like what Dicken's has done in *David Copperfield*.

To begin with, the picture Aravind Adiga paints of India in *The White Tiger* is of a nearly feudal society disguised as a democratic society. Though, the country gained its independence from the Britain in the year 1947, but the majority of people in India are still trapped in servitude. The first lesson Balram, the narrator, has for us is the reality of rural life in India. In his small village everybody is

beholden or slave to one of four landlords. Each one had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in them. He says,

“The Stork ... owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village. His brother was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. The Raven owned the worst land, which was the dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze with their flocks. The Buffalo was greediest of the lot. He had eaten up the rickshaws and the roads. So, if you ran a rickshaw, or used the road, you had to pay him his feed—one-third of whatever you earned, no less” (Adiga 20).

Beside this feudal system Adiga, focuses other social issues such discrimination, exploitation of Dalits and poor. There are certain rules for poor to enter in the mall. Adiga narrates the incident happened with a driver. He describes, “The guard at the door had stopped him. He pointed his stick at the man's feet and shook his head—the man had sandals on his feet. All of us drivers too had sandals on our feet. But everyone who was allowed into the mall had shoes on their feet” (125). So, a man from low status can't enter an Indian mall. Even if he enters stealthily, he is then caught, beaten and publicly humiliated. He also says that Indian caste system is worse, or at least as bad as the secret police of a totalitarian state.

Beside these issues, Adiga doesn't refrain himself from criticizing issues related sex and other things. He makes it clear as “traditional Indian village is (in)complete without its blue-movie theater” (19). Every Indian book stall sells rape magazines. Balram says to Premier of China that “Now I have to tell you about this magazine, *Murder Weekly*, since our prime minister certainly won't tell you anything about it. It's sold in every newsstand in the city, alongside the cheap novels, and it is very popular reading among all the servants of the city—

whether they be cooks, children's maids, or gardeners” (104). Beside it, Balram writes the dark side of spirituality in India to the Premier of China as “Mr. Premier, every day thousands of foreigners fly into my country for enlightenment. They go to the Himalayas, or to Benaras, or to Bodh Gaya. They get into weird poses of yoga, smoke hashish, shag a sadhu or two, and think they're getting enlightened” (236). According to Adiga, these are the salient features of new India.

Adiga has also presented the dark side of child-labour and the reasons behind it. Balram calls himself; “half-baked”, like many others in the country. He was not allowed to finish school, with only a smattering of all sorts of knowledge. He remembers that he was a smart lad, and he was even recognised by a school inspector, who praised him as a ‘white tiger’, the rarest of animals -- the creature that only comes along once in a generation. The school inspector promised to give a scholarship and proper schooling to Balram but his family took him out of school and put him to work at a teashop to pay off the debt taken for marriage of one of the daughters in the family.

Beside child labour problem, he presents pitiable condition of the Indian servants and humiliation at hands of their masters. According to him, in India, if an owner runs over a man with his car, his driver has to go to jail instead of the owner. In this novel, we see Balram suffer humiliation after humiliation and is expected to take it. His employer's wife gets drunk one night and forces Balram to let her drive and she kills a child. They force him to give a confession that he was driving in order to avoid arrest and other things. It's taken as matter of course that, as he is their servant, he is too glad to go to jail for them. Another thing, if a servant steals anything, then his entire family, back home, is lynched to death and their women are being repeatedly raped. There are separate markets for servants. In Indian brothels, they take extra money from servants, called as “Working-class surcharge” (197). At one-point Balram explains the reason of loyalty of the servants towards their masters. He says to the Premier of China about the servants, and why don't they demand a cut or threaten them with the police, or at the very least stand up to the masters whom they can outnumber by at least a thousand to one. Balram calls

it the “Rooster Coop syndrome”. He says “It's because 99.9 percent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market” (148). In the markets in New Delhi, hens and roosters are stuffed into wire cages where they spend their days pecking and shitting on each other and fighting just to breathe. According to Balram, it's the same for the poor and working class in India. They are also busy fighting among each other for the chance to breathe, as they are not be able to escape their cages. The threat of violence against their families if they misbehave is a factor as well. Balram shares a story of a servant who did something wrong, and the landlord had his entire family killed in retaliation. Adiga finds solution to this problem of exploitation of downtrodden class in the teaching of Buddha and Gandhi. He says, “when your driver starts to read about Gandhi and the Buddha that it's time to wet your pants” (105). Balram who is his creation says only White Tiger can risk the lives of his entire family to steal the seven hundred thousand rupees his employer is carrying in a red leather bag to bribe a politician.

Corruption and bribery are the other social evils reflected in this story. He presents the picture of a school where the teacher steals the money for the school-food-programme and sells the uniforms meant for the students but no one charges him, as he hasn't been paid in six months. Anyone in power abuses it for his or her own benefit. He learns that the Stork's family fortune comes from illegally selling coal out of government mines. His employer bribes ministers to turn a blind eye to their fraudulent business and allow family avoid income tax. Balram's experience in the big city as an employee of Stork's family who bribe to politicians allows us for some amusing observations and commentary on contemporary Indian conditions, and a sheer contrast of poverty and wealth. When his master goes to New Delhi, Balram also goes with him and drives him around the capital. He watches him greasing the palms of all the various political fixers and parliamentarians in order to ensure the family business survives. One hundred thousand rupees here, two hundred thousand there, and Balram sits in the front seat seeing nothing, but witnessing all the bribery and corruption. By the end, when Balram becomes a boss, he has certainly learned to

work the system of greasing the proper wheels (and palms).

Apart from being the witness of the crime, Balram himself becomes a criminal. He murders his employer Mr. Ashok for the money he is carrying to pay for bribe. He uses that amount for starting a taxi company called ‘White Tiger Drivers’ to bring call center workers home safely at night. Balram is aware of his crime and fears that he may be prosecuted one day. But he isn't felt ashamed of it. He says that that crime allowed him to live a life of a free person rather than a servant.

Thus, *The White Tiger* is a journey of a man with extra-ordinary qualities who was denied opportunities and who prefers to commit crime as he wants to be successful like his employers. The journey from Darkness to the Light is not smooth. Only a White Tiger can do this. He finds nothing wrong in it, as it has become an accepted social norm in India for success. Along with the progress of the country, Adiga highlights the social evils in contemporary India like child-labours, pitiable conditions of peasants, social discrimination, humiliation of servants at hands of their master, and corruption and bribery at every level. It seems that Adiga supports Balram's act of murdering Mr. Ashok, then being the victim of Rooster Coop syndrome.

Works Cited:

1. Adiga, Aravid. *The White Tiger*, Harper Collins India, New Delhi, 2008. Print.
2. Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, Penguin Classics, 1997. Print.
3. Flaubert, Gustav. *Madame Bovary*, Bantam Classics, 1982. Print.
4. Jeffries, Stuart. “Roars of anger”, *The Guardian*, Thursday 16, October 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/16/booker-prize>
5. Scott, Alex. “An Inquiry into the Meaning of Consciousness”, 2000. 25th December 2010, <http://www.angelfire.com/md2/timewarp/consciousness.html>.