



## ‘Rags to riches’ narrative with a twist: A critical reflection on aravind adiga’s *The white tiger*

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### Abstract

Narratives of rags to riches have been sold as motivational stories around the world championing the fact that each individual, if s/he has the right competence/ potential and earnest desire to achieve things, then nothing is impossible to achieve in this world. The paper “‘Rags to Riches’ Narrative with a Twist: A Critical Reflection on Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*” critically explores the story of Balram Halwai as he is being forced to commit a murder to fulfil his dream of becoming an entrepreneur and be on the other side of the underdogs of India. The Indian poorer sections are caught in the rooster coop from where they dare not take a leap, but Balram does. But this standalone narrative is not the story of every Indian, but a satire on the India system of governance, political and societal makeup which does not allow characters like Balram to even rise up from their underdog status. The paper does not justify the crime that is committed by Balram to become a successful entrepreneur, but problematizes the notion of violence that is being perpetrated on the Indian underdogs which forces them to live an inhuman life in their rooster coop and eventually perish to the oppressive injustices perpetrated on them time and again.

**Keywords:** aravind adiga, balram halwai, bangalore, bihar, entrepreneur, poverty, rags to riches, rooster coop, *The white tiger*, underdog

### Introduction

The underdogs of India have always lived a life in the dark corners of the nation where the light of development never reached even though there has been supposedly many governmental schemes and initiatives to ameliorate their conditions. Since the Indian independence, there has been efforts to bring about, though mostly lacking sincerity despite the constitutional provisions, changes in the plight of the underprivileged economically weaker sections of the society, yet people like Balram Halwai are always pushed to a life of extreme hardships and ignominy, even though they try their best to come out of their debilitating state. It is but a shame on the Indian society that even after more than six decades of Indian independence, we have not yet been able to provide the necessary impetus – both economic and educational – to look after the needs of the underdogs to break free from their poverty and live a respectful life.

The short paper seeks to explore the journey of Balram Halwai in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* from a worker in a rural tea stall in Laxmangarh, Bihar to an entrepreneur in Bangalore. The story of rags to riches often makes for interesting and inspiring reads and are always thought to motivational narratives which falsely makes the readers believe that they too can come out of their debilitating state to reach the zenith of social and economic hierarchy. Adiga shows that in India, if a person from the lower class wants to break free from his class status and endeavor to reach a better position in life, then there are forces which work not to push him, but to pull him down to the herd to which he belongs. Moreover, Adiga also shows how the poorer sections of Indian society are all caught in the rooster coop from where they cannot take any leap as their minds are ingrained in such a manner that they cannot but do against their master even though they are aware the masters are oppressing them all the time. Aravind Adiga’s realistic take on this supposedly motivational theme makes us aware of

the murky aspects of such stories as in case of Balram Halwai, as it is only by committing the crime of murdering his master Ashok that he could pave his path to reach that realm of society where very few are allowed to enter.

India’s problem is that it does not proactively think of ways in which the man-made divisions in society can be eradicated and the poorer sections of society are given the just premise to stand on their own right and receive the minimum to live a respectable hunger-free life having the necessary resources to pursue the path of progress and realize the potential that the person has within him. When lack of resources makes a person kill his dreams, his ambitions, his passion and his desire to achieve greater things in life, it makes the person live a life below dignity where he is not able to adjust to himself at each and every instant of his life. Along with that when the person is treated as if he is a non-human having no right of his own and is being abused and thrashed at each instance to ascertain the feudal mindset, it becomes more of a disheartening experience for the person as is being portrayed in the character of Balram.

India has supposedly gone through its process of modernization, it has westernized itself – when we read the pages where Delhi and Gurgaon and its posh localities along with corridors of powers are being discussed we experience the glitz and glamour of the so-called modernization but beneath that modernity and progress, lies the darker world of the toiling masses who at each instant of their lives are not just disrespecting their human dignity, but also are made to sell their conscience to somehow survive the odds and oddities that the ruling elite class creates for them. It is but the irony of the modern-day Indian society that society is fiercely divided in terms of class – where the richer ones are having all the privileges of enjoying the most advanced technology and the luxuries of life as well as protection from being caught by the police even when they commit a

crime, whereas the poorer sections are victims of all the oppressions (Drèze, & Sen. 2002) <sup>[3]</sup>. Such a web, this richer section of the society has created that the financially weaker ones are always caught in its web and they have no way out. When Pinky Madam kills someone in a road accident while driving madly in a state of drunkenness, Balram is made to sign the statement that he was driving the car and he is responsible for it. Till Balram signs the statement, he is being pursued with sweet words; and as soon as the signing is done, he is being verbally abused as the underbelly of India are usually treated, with curse words before and after each statement.

Is there any way out for people like Balram? Balram takes out a path to ameliorate his condition – the path of violence – to murder the master, take his money and start his life fresh as an entrepreneur in Bangalore. He takes a new name of his master – creates a different identity for himself to fool the police and start life afresh. He is able to take the leap out of the rooster coop, but the rest of India's poor still live in that coop and suffer each instant of their lives. Adiga opines that it is not that the poorer ones do not take a leap as they are honest, but they do not have the courage to break free from the rooster coop and rebel –

Because Indians are the world's most honest people... No. It's because 99.9 per cent of us are caught in the Rooster coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market. The Rooster Coop doesn't always work with miniscule sums of money.... Masters trust their servants with diamonds in this country!... handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude... can a man break out of the coop? ...*the Indian family*, is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop. ... only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed– hunted, beaten, and burned alive by masters – can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature (175-7).

The “hunted” and “beaten” populace are aware of their plight, know very well that they will always be abused and maltreated and yet they keep on serving their masters with all integrity without giving an instance to show their discontent against the treatment meted out to them (Joseph, 2009). The idea of “perpetual servitude” is being manifest in their minds in such a manner that to decolonize their subalterns seem to be an impossible task. Adiga speaks about this difference about two classes in stark words – “These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh...The slum ended in an open sewer – a small river of black water went sluggishly past me, bubbles sparkling in it and...Two children were splashing about in the black water” (260).

When we look at Premchand's *Godan*, we see this coop mentality when Hori, farmer from Awadh knows very well how he is being victimized by the zamindar, money lenders and the purohit, but he does not take a stand and continue to suffer in silence to his death. Hori is not a lone example, most Indians with their notion of servitude carry on living on the bread crumbs thrown at them by their masters and yet they will never bark at their masters, leave alone the thought of biting them. This is not because of the faithfulness of the servant class, but because of their sense of fear which make them be caged in the rooster coop and not rebel though at

each instant someone or the other from the coop is being mercilessly butchered for the sake of the masters. Adiga again gives a perfect example of such practices as he writes–

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

Thus, even though it is said that a sense of servitude and faithfulness to the master is ingrained in the minds of the servants and other serving classes such as cooks, drivers, security guards and others, yet it is a fact that their servitude is maintained by the element of fear in their minds which does not allow them to take the leap from the rooster coop.

What does Balram's journey speak about India as a nation? Some may say that Balram's story is a standalone narrative of a person who commits crime to get out of his position from being an underbelly. It is but an irony that despite the capitalist paradigm which speaks of people having equal access to moving up in the social ladder, all the gates to move out of being the underprivileged is closed for the underprivileged. In very dubious and intricate ways, the gates to upper movement of marginalized people have been barricaded. They are being victimized and the road to their coming out of victimized status is being closed in diverse ways. Balram in his childhood shows promise of being a better student in his rural school and is presented to be someone who is conversant with English – a definite way to rise up the social ladder because of the elite status of English in the neo-colonial Indian set up. He is being termed as “the white tiger” by the school inspector, but as it happens with the lower classes, the pressures of financial hardships close the doors of education and Balram is dropped out of school to become a serving boy at a rural tea-stall.

Even then Balram's indomitable spirit does not accept his plight as he decides to be a driver to Ashok so that he can start an upward movement in terms of getting into a better financial position with a regular income. There too, he uses his cunningness to make himself the choice of driving Ashok Sir and Pinky Madam to New Delhi and be their driver in their Gurgaon apartment. But his spirit of being different from his people can be seen even here when he decides not to get involved in fun and frolic with other drivers of the apartment, but to stay apart from them and think of paving a path for himself (Singh 2009) <sup>[6]</sup>.

Ultimately when he decides to murder his master Ashok, he seems resolved that is the only way in which he can somehow manage to take a leap from his debilitating state. He takes the leap carefully, leaves New Delhi immediately and goes to Bangalore, the city of the new technology and call centres, and after careful study of the professional set up of the city, decides to open a travel agency providing cab service to the multinational offices. He bribes the police to intervene and stop the services of other travel agency and finds a place for himself in the business. He now runs a successful travel agency where he takes care of his drivers and makes every attempt to treat them respectfully –

Yes, Ashok! That's what I call myself these days. Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur, settled in Bangalore... I would show you all the secrets of my business...my drivers,

my garages, my mechanics, and my paid-off policemen. All of them belong to me – Munna, whose destiny was to be a sweet-maker! (302).

The Halwai turns an entrepreneur as he is the white tiger who can take the leap from the rooster coop and make a place for himself. With his entrepreneurial spirit, he not just gauges the professional, financial and business situation in Bangalore, but finds the appropriate venture for himself in which he has some knowledge, competence and expertise – Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of drivers. I don't treat them like servants – I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling them my 'family' either. They're my employees, I'm their boss, that's all. I make them sign a contract and I sign it too, and both of us must honour that contract. That's all. If they notice the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I keep things clean, they'll go up in life. If they don't, they'll be drivers all their lives. I leave the choice up to them. When the work is done, I kick them out of the office: no chitchat, no cups of coffee. A White Tiger keeps no friends. It's too dangerous (302).

Many from the India's underbelly have the competence and talent in them to reach much higher in life, but due to lack of opportunities and resources, their potential is wasted in doing some or the other manual works in which their talent is not used. And as stated, it is true that even if they try to reach higher place than where they are born, the society creates many obstructions for him and all the ways are shut for him. Even when the person showcases his talent, that is usually ignored and he is shown his status of being an underbelly. The continuous insults and tirades against him not just dampen his spirit, but also takes away all his confidence and makes him submit to the ruling class as he is being threatened at each moment of his life and he just somehow remains in the rooster coop and never takes the jump to come out of it. Balram Halwai does as he is the 'white tiger' – the one who with his spirit of not accepting his fate as it is decided by the elites, chooses to write a fate of his own and he is ready to pay a price for it. He chooses violence as a means to counter all the violence that the underbelly of India is going through at each instant of their lives. Whereas the violence, oppression and suppression of the is being justified, but Balram's violence would be severely punished and thus he chooses to change his identity and become an entrepreneur who now controls the Police in Bangalore with his money. Balram Halwai is an example of how to misuse power, but he has learnt this from the elites of the society, the politicians that he has seen from his childhood, the (mis)governance that he and all Indians are acquainted with, the corruptions in the high corridor of power that he has been witness to.

Thus, the English-speaking rural boy takes a journey from his *jhuggi* in Laxmangarh in Bihar to be an entrepreneur in tech-savvy Bangalore – a true journey of rags to riches – but with a twist – with an anger and satirical attack at every word in the narrative which states that the journey to the top is an impossibility for Indian underbelly till they do not dare to break the rooster coop. Though Adiga makes use of violence as a means to make his protagonist achieve his objective in life, he does not glorify that violence, but moreover portrays how violence is a rendition of the oppressed psyche of people like Balaram which makes Deirdre Donahue label *The White Tiger* as an angry novel (Donahue, 2008) <sup>[2]</sup>.

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