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Call for Social Justice in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Pawan Baral

Department of English, Bhaktapur Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan university.

Email: pawan.baral@bkmc.tu.edu.np

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Abstract

*The paper aims at examining Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in the light of social justice under the then political establishments of India where globalization has almost paralyzed the heart of democracy itself. Adiga deploys many techniques to intensify his arguments, the amalgamation of which has a magic-like emphatic effect in his expression of bitterness. He mixes up lightheartedness, extremity of injustice, IT age version of epistolary mode, and playful colloquial language in such a way it hypnotizes the readers from suspecting frequent exaggerations of situations and lack of authenticity in his depiction. The paper ultimately argues that Adiga calls for a just society through the novel. He feels ashamed of the contemporary democratic practice which may produce many, many Balrams unless the system of government restores social justice in time. With strong conviction on democracy as a good system of government, Adiga leaves a note of optimism amid confusion and hopelessness. As a staunch democrat, he has two ways of reformation in the present practice in the final chapter: the first for the short-run and the other for the long-run. Ultimately, Adiga envisions that enlightened citizenry can contribute to the free and fair practice of democracy and of globalization in the long run. The study adopts qualitative based literary mode of research. It draws primary data through close reading of the text in question. Then the firsthand data from the text will be analyzed drawing and departing the ideas of critics and thinkers of social justice, globalization and democracy as well as.*

Keywords: Adiga's bitterness of tone, defunct democracy, globalization, post-Independence, social Justice

Introduction

The paper explores Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in the light of social justice under the globalized India at the dawn of the twenty-first century, when globalization has almost paralyzed the heart of democracy itself. Set in the post-Independence India where globalization has been altering the traditional pattern of life in the country, Adiga's *The White Tiger* has depicted the intensified struggle between the social classes: haves and have-nots. Adiga attacks the brutal injustices of society in the same way writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the past. Coming from crushing rural poverty, the protagonist Balram Halwai, a laborer born and raised in a small village utterly controlled by crooked and feudally powerful landlords, starts his journey from "the Darkness," a particularly backward region of India through Delhi as a driver for one of the landlord's westernized sons, and ends in Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money. The novel's publisher Harper Collins

in its blurb says Adiga chooses to tell such “an utterly amoral, brilliantly irreverent, deeply endearing and altogether unforgettable journey of entrepreneurial success of the lead character to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, in a series of letters written in seven consecutive nights” (cover copy). At the end of the novel, Balram rationalizes his actions and considers that his freedom is worth the lives of his family and of Ashok, letting the reader think of the dark humored tale. This ironic dimension calls for examining the novel in the light of social justice under political establishments of India where the protagonist achieves the so-called economic prosperity.

Arvind Adiga follows Jonathan Swift’s satirical lead when he relates Balram Haluwai’s journey from a poverty-stricken rural backward background to a prosperous urban present. Like Swift who grotesquely argues that Ireland’s poor escape their poverty by selling their children as food to the American rich in “A Modest Proposal” (1729), Adiga sketches Balram’s story of economic bloom as a sample for entrepreneurship in India, a country with democratic system ruled by the neo-liberal ridden politicians and policy makers who let the global capital flow indiscriminately and paralyze the democratic value completely neglecting to the disadvantaged Indians. Throughout the whole course of his struggle, he becomes a victim or a witness of extreme forms of exploitation and maltreatment prevalent in the society

Social Justice in Globalized Democracy

The essence of social justice lies in the common good and fairness as it manifests in society. It speaks of general welfare by providing equal opportunity for good and services for a good living for everybody preserving individual’s economic rights in ownership, work, and income. It denies discrimination of any kind. *John Rawls*, an American political philosopher in the liberal tradition presents a conception of justice which generalizes and carries to a higher level of abstraction. His *theory of justice* as fairness claims:

the principles of justice for the basic structure of society are the object of the original agreement. They are the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their own interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association. These principles are to regulate all further agreements; they specify the kinds of social cooperation that can be entered into and the forms of government that can be established. (Rawls, 1999, p. 10)

Rawls’ theory of justice rejects the utilitarian philosophies and holds that every individual has an equal right to basic liberties, and should have the right to opportunities. Discussing the fundamental principles of social justice, Mona Khechen states “social justice is commonly associated with the creation of a just society” despite the fact that there is no “consensus on the meaning and scope of the term.” Its underlying assumption “implies human welfare through equal rights and share of benefits, fair treatment, recognition of cultural differences, and equitable access to resources and opportunities” (4). The dynamics of social justice has undergone a change in today’s globalized world where political, economic, social cultural relationships are not restricted to territorial boundaries or to state actors because globalization has diminished the role of state to a partner, catalyst, and facilitator from a direct provider of security. In this context, U.K. Jha (2004) observes, “The classical model of democracy, despite many flaws, at least provided a clear institutional channel for the participation of citizens, for the representation of their interests and for clear lines of accountability” (p. 535). With the collapse

of the classical model of democracy, citizens lose command over the state executives who become helpless in front of the international surveillance of IMF and other institutions. Assessing the effects of globalization on the protection of human rights, Robert McCorquodale and Richard Fairbrother (1999) in "Globalization and human rights" assert that "Globalization and the international legal order are opportunities to end the absolute sovereignty of the state," and, thus, the "domestic jurisdiction of a state" becomes "a matter of legitimate international concern" (p. 763). They also point out the detrimental effects on social justice due to development strategies which are oriented towards economic growth and financial consideration. Furthermore, "the possibility of the fragmentation of states" shifts the "decision-making process away from governments and people to globalized economic institutions" who have "a limited interest in the social and cultural welfare" (p.765). This shows that globalization has had negative impact for a democratic system to be a truly socially responsible system of governance. However, the case studies on globalization effects do not unanimously agree with the globalization being detrimental to democratic good governance. Dan O'Brien's observation about European situation in "The Market as a Mechanism for Social Justice: The Case of Europe," dismisses the charges that "markets results in greater inequality, increased social atomization and an erosion of standards and rights" (2005, p. 262). He concludes,

The market must play a greater role and state intervention should be reduced. This should not be seen as the thin end of a "neoliberal" wedge or a foot on a slippery slope to a society without state-provided welfare –the role of state will remain central both to improving economic efficiency and social provision. But a strengthened role for the market is essential; the result will be a stronger and fairer society" (O'Brien, 2005, p. 264).

In contrary to O'Brien's claim's about today's citizens of the European Union enjoying better life than ever before, Ruddar Datt's study of Indian scenario about the same period argues that the present course of globalization has been detrimental on lives of the unprivileged population. He quotes Stiglitz's idea about the Western countries' double standard asking the poor countries "to eliminate trade barriers, but kept up their own barriers preventing developing countries from exporting agricultural products" (Datt, 2005, p. 73). His major findings include: jobless growth, deteriorating job security, a systematic exploitation of tribal communities, slowing down of the process of poverty reduction, widening regional disparity, sidelining of decent work, and increasing trade deficit.

All the works on globalization and its effect on democracy, social justice examined above have agreed with the all-pervasive influence of globalization which has called up a change in existing life pattern of people, of organizations, and even of states. In this context, democracy has to retain its essence of being accountable to those whom it represents. For this, it must play an active role in providing social and economic security especially to the poor and other disadvantaged groups of population to prove itself as the final form of human government based on markets and democracy as Francis Fukuyama proclaimed in 1989. It needs to adjust and address the tremendous impact of globalization. Nisar-ul-Haq (2004) in "Globalization: Towards a New Perspective on Political Economy" talks about the crisis in political economy that has been facing by the developing countries like India. They have the challenges to adjust the newly-emerged increasing tension between western and Asian models of capitalism. Therefore, there exists the political and economic "uncertainties regarding the openness of the trading system, the adequacy of the rules of governing the international economy and prospects for

potential economic conflict” (p. 317). In the concluding section, he writes,

In the poorer countries, it may accentuate inequality and certain parts of the world could become marginalized. Globalization of the financial markets can generate risks of instability, which requires all countries to pursue sound economic policies and structural reforms. Better prudential regulation and supervision in the financial markets are essential elements in promoting the stability of the international monetary and financial system. Cooperation among regulatory and supervisory authorities should continue to adopt to financial innovations, and to the growth in cross-border capital movements and internationally active financial institutions. (Nisar-ul-Haq, 2004, p. 328),

The subsequent section examines Adiga’s *The White Tiger* in the light of the insights like heightened inequality, marginalized rural areas, lack of prudential regulation and supervision of financial system, cross-border capital movements and financial institutions mentioned in the quote.

Adiga’s Biting Tone and Social Justice

In the context of overpowering forces of globalization, “the major challenge” that democratic governance faces, as U.K. Jha points out, “is to make democracy a democracy of substance.” In this context, to “enforce accountability over the institutions governance in a multilayered framework and make democracy more responsive transparent and substantive”, Jha recommends, “is to build up and strengthen the political and social movements at various level (i.e., local, regional, national and global) as a countervailing forces to oppose the hegemonic policies of the institutions and organizations representing global economic and political power” (2004, p. 537). On the other hand, Adiga’s main story line, i.e., Balram’s by-hook-or-by-crook elevation of social position, pictures all-gloomy picture of India at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Toral Gajarawala (2009) analyzes the novel in terms of politico-social dimension. He sees Balram as a rebel who “is engaged in a very different type of revolt”. For Gajarawala, he is ‘a hero concomitant with the times, atypical of the “angry young man”, the “man of the people”, or the “anti-hero”, all of whom engage in a range of ethical uprisings from vigilante justice to covert subversion to democratic” (p. 23). He concludes, “he has a fierce critique of injustice” (p. 23). In the light of Jha’s recommendation and utter failure of Indian governance that Adiga depicts, this section explores Adiga’s intention in the novel in relation to the biting tone of the novel.

Jha’s argument above justifies the relevance and appropriateness of Adiga’s use of biting tone and his choice of all-gloomy setting for the novel. In order to escape the “Darkness” and enter into the “Light,” Adiga puts Balram’s in such a situation that the hero becomes a part of rotten and corrupted system itself. This implicates that a person of the unprivileged class like Balram do not have any other way to achieve success in life under the reign of an utterly defunct democratic system paralyzed due to the overwhelming influence of globalization. In such context when “Humanity stands at a crossroads, confronting crises so profound, all encompassing, and alarming” Vincent Walsh writes, “the impartial observer” should feel his duty “regard this moment as unprecedented in human history.” He further talks about the duty of literary artists and writers as:

We need to expand our consciousness even to attempt to comprehend what is happening. We need to create novel forms of linguistic expression for describing our predicament, for communicating among ourselves our common emergency. How can the old, familiar terms possibly account for unparalleled conundrums of an implicit scope and degree that quite

literally staggers the imagination? We need to generate awareness and sound the alarm on a global level, and begin to articulate innovative alternatives to traditional social, political, academic, and artistic discourse. (Walsh, 2009, p. 1)

As indicated by Walsh, Adiga chooses lighthearted bitterness technique as means to relate Balram's story of success with the money that he snatches by slitting his master Mr. Ashok. As an alternative to traditional social, political, academic and artistic discourse, Adiga's choice of characters, setting, tone, and plot for the novel reminds of Darwin's struggle of survival sort of situation, and forcefully establishes that democracy should be a system of substance rather than form by foregrounding the miserable condition of the unprivileged.

Despite little credibility, even less authenticity of depiction and exaggeration of the character and situation, the sarcastic mode predominates throughout the novel. Adiga attacks economic, social, and political of the society in a biting tone. He outstandingly blends lightheartedness and extremity in his satires. Therefore, the contexts that he introduces produce a strange kind of effect which is both humorous and bitter at the same time, a characteristic trait of his writing frequently referred as black humor by critics in reviews and criticisms. As quoted earlier, he depicts the women of Laxamangarh jumping over their male family members like wild cats on a piece of flesh immediately after their arrival at home with the little amount of money they have earned in the nearby cities. The acts like hiding, fighting, wailing, shrieking etc. all sound and seem unexpected as well as abnormal at the moment of homecoming.

These acts also reveal Adiga's use of animal imagery to intensify the effect of his biting tone. In addition to his choice of the title of the novel, his naming of his village landlords and his acquiring of the name for himself from the school inspector, Balram frequently makes of metaphors related to animals or animal behavior in talking about the actions of the human beings. He describes one of his landlords, the Wild Boar, "When he passed by women, his car would stop; the windows would roll down to reveal his grin; two of his teeth, on either side of his nose, were long and curved, like little tusks" (Adiga, 2008, p. 25). Adiga shows the animal-like qualities in the Landlord's physical appearance as well as in his behavior toward women. Similarly, when a Sikh truck driver with "a big blue turban comes to recruit a boy from Laxamangarh as his assistant, he orders all the boys assembled there to take off their shirts "to see a man's nipples" before offering the job. While examining Balram's body, "he squeezed the nipples –slapped" his "butt –glared into" his "eyes –poked the stick against" his "thigh" and discards him saying "Too thin! Fuck off" (Adiga, 2008, p. 55). The act of violence and his search for physical qualities as for the criteria of selection reveal his animal-like quality in the driver. Not only this, this quality is found even in cultured people like Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam despite their Western background. One night driving them from Connaught Place to home when they are fully "reeked of some English liquor", Balram catches their animal-like activities in the rearview mirror as: "he was pushing his hand up and down her thigh, and she was giggling" (Adiga, 2008, p. 158). Sundhya Walther in "Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" sees the fabular form of the novel due to the effects of colonialism. She finds Balram as "an impoverished and disenfranchised human being, perceives himself as being like—or being treated as—an animal" (Walther, 2014, p. 579). The instances like these that abound throughout the novel heighten the intensity of his satire by adding the tone of lighthearted bitterness in the total effect.

In addition, Adiga's biting tone gets greater emphatic effect due to its comprehensiveness. His attack leaves no social aspect untouched. Except the dominant aspects like politics, governance, economy and business, education, public health he shows his concern on environmental pollution and nutrition level of the people in his satire. Drawing the Chinese Premier's attention towards the polluted state of rivers, he advises Mr. Jiabao "not to dip in the Ganga" as the water is "full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids" (Adiga, 2008, p. 15). The quote not only speaks of institutional and individual irresponsible behavior towards environmental. At another point of the narrative, he depicts "rush hour in Delhi as:

Cars, scooters, motorbikes, autorickshaws, black taxis, jostling for space on the road. The pollution is so bad that the men on the motorbikes and scooters have a handkerchief wrapped on their faces –each time you stop at a red light you see a row of men with black glasses and masks on their faces, as if the whole city were out on a bank heist that morning. (Adiga, 2008, p. 133)

The passage playfully depicts air pollution in Delhi. One after another, Adiga picks up every social aspect and tells something in the tone of lighthearted bitterness. In this way, his satire gets greater degree of intensity and scope.

Despite his biting in exposing utter hopelessness of the twenty-first century Indian governance in different sectors, the target of his attack is democratic practice rather than the system itself. He exposes the evils like corruption, exploitation, discrimination in different sectors due to the malpractice of the contemporary Indian politicians, officials at decision making level and implementers. He deliberately sets the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao as an addressee for a novel written at a time when major transformations in Indian society have been taking place due to overpowering influence of modernization and globalization. His narrator boasts of India in the tone of lighthearted bitterness, "And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, *does* have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the field of technology" (Adiga, 2008, p. 4). Italicized auxiliary verb in the quote shows that he wants to focus the breeding of entrepreneurship in India to a leading figure behind Beijing's economic policy. Immediately after a few paragraphs, he mockingly says that "Chinese are great lovers of freedom and individual liberty" (Adiga, 2008, p. 5). He feels his obligation to share "about democracy –something that you Chinese, I am aware, are not very familiar with" (Adiga, 2008, p. 91). He writes, "I gather you yellow-skinned men, despite your triumphs in sewage, drinking water, and Olympic gold medals, still don't have democracy. Some politicians on the radio was saying that that's why we Indians are going to beat you: we may not have sewage, drinking water and Olympic gold medals, but we *do* have democracy" (Adiga, 2008, p. 95-96). Again, the italicized auxiliary foregrounds the idea that the single characteristic that India possess surpasses all the achievements that Chinese good governance has been acquiring. Therefore, he invites Wen to Bangalore so that he can share "something important---about Bangalore" (Adiga, 2008, p. 4) with him. A.J. Sebastian (2009) in "Poor-Rich Divide in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" traces the great poor-rich divide which might have dangerous consequences, if unresolved. He views that the novel is an excellent social commentary on the poor rich divide in India and tries to draw the attention "every right thinking citizen to read the signs of the times and be socially conscious of the rights and duties of each one, irrespective of caste,

creed or economic status, to prevent create the types of Ashok and Balram in our society” (Sebastian, 2009, p. 244). In all these quotes, Adiga is saying that it is the system which is more important than the manifestations of the system itself.

Despite utter hopelessness in contemporary practice of governance, Adiga has a solid vision to choose the Indian system with so many drawbacks over the Chinese system. He justifies this solid reason through Balram’s model for social justice in the final chapter of the novel. In Bangalore, Balram starts exploiting all the loopholes of the society to become a successful businessman. He also takes an upper caste name ‘Ashok Sharma’ to become a member of the elite class. Unable to change the century old deeply rooted social ills, he presents himself as socially responsible business cum master, a role model businessman that Adiga envisions to run business in a just society. This occurs when Asif, a driver of his White Tiger Drivers, accidentally kills a little boy riding on his bicycle while driving recklessly to meet schedules. He calmly handles the situation. Immediately he meets the police officer and makes all arrangements to rescue his driver taking full responsibility on himself as the owner of the Company. Despite the fact that he uses his influence to save the driver and silence the little boy’s brother on the ground of a silly logic “at the time of the accident, your brother’s bicycle had no working lights” (309), Ashok Sharma alias Balram visits the victim’s family in person to express his heartfelt condolence, and leaves an envelope with 25,000 rupees inside in compensation, and also offers the boy’s bitter older brother a job as a driver in his company. Here, Adiga’s logic is that accidents cannot be avoided but a businessman should be socially responsible and humane. This sort of temporary provision might check the contemporary Indian society from getting further worse in the context of paralyzed democratic system.

But Adiga envisions a long-run solution to address this present state of hopelessness in the novel. He has expressed this through Balram’s ultimate plan to open a school in the ending paragraphs. In midst of “the rooster coop” situation of the unprivileged surrounded by illiteracy, unemployment, Zamindari practice, social taboos, rigid caste discrimination, caste and culture conflict, corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, economic disparity, superstitions, corrupt education system and health services, the novel seems to suggest that the social and economic salvation for these poor masses lies in providing quality education to them. His plan runs,

After three or four years in real estate, I think I might sell everything, take the money, and start a school –an English language school, for poor children in Bangalore. A school where you won’t be allowed to corrupt anyone’s head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi – nothing but facts of life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers, unleashed on Bangalore! We would have this city on our knees. (Adiga, 2008, p. 319)

The quote replicates Adiga’s strong conviction on nail-flesh sort of relationship between democracy and education. The bright future of the poor is possible only in a democratic society where every individual has opportunities to show their potential through fair competition. And also, educated citizenry is prerequisite for democracy to flourish. Adiga argues for imparting education of wider perspective. The expression education free of God or Gandhi implies that it will be free of any sort of religious tales of superstitions and narrowmindedness, and will have global viability and recognition.

Conclusion

Adiga intentionally deploys many techniques to intensify his feeling of bitterness in the novel. He mixes up lightheartedness, extremity of injustice, IT age version of epistolary mode, and playful colloquial language in such a way it hypnotizes the readers from suspecting his frequent exaggerations of situations and lack of authenticity in his depiction. The amalgamation has a magic-like emphatic effect in his expression of bitterness. In addition, he has used abound metaphors with animalizing configuration to describe people and their actions. This technique produces the sense of shame for the present practice of the society, and further justifies his bitterness and his choice of a criminal as a hero in the novel. The total effect of such extremity of bitterness implicates that Adiga feels ashamed of the contemporary democratic practice which may produce many, many Balrams unless the system of government restores social justice in time. With strong conviction on democracy as a good system of government, Adiga leaves a note of optimism in the midst confusion and hopelessness. As a staunch democrat, he has two ways of reformation in the present practice in the final chapter: the first for the short-run and the other for the long-run. Therefore, Balram alias Ashok Sharma feels his obligation to soothe the wounds of the beavered family of the boy whom his driver Asif accidentally kills due to high speed to meet the deadline even though he has already managed the case with the help of the corrupted police officer. He not only provides 25000 rupees to the family, but also offers the boy's brother a job of a driver to the boy's brother even if the brother has behaved very badly to him after the accident. He knows this sort of temporary management of social justice might not be enough. So, his hero envisions opening an English school to impart quality education of global viability and recognition to the poor or the unprivileged because good education will be the surest weapon against all kinds of social ills in future. And enlightened citizenry can contribute to the free and fair practice of democracy and of globalization in the long run.

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