Research Paper English

Pertinent Themes in Arvind Adiga's 'The White Tiger'

Vishal Pandya

Assistant Professor of English,Nandkunvarba Mahila College, Devrajnagar-2, City Ring Road, Bhavnagar – 364002

ABSTRACT

'The White Tiger' tells the story of a poor Indian man who wishes to leave the Darkness with its miseries and poverty so he could experience the life of the rich in the Light. The whole novel is told through letters in which he addresses some Chinese premier who wants to visit and know more about India. The novel contains massive amount without being an extensive epic or losing its firm focus. The book shows a modern day, capitalist Indian society with free market and business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, there are social castes. The novel portrays India's society as very negative towards the lower social caste which Balram refers to as the "Darkness". This paper attempts to look into various themes that are exceptionally presented in the Booker Prize winning Novel.

KEYWORDS Darkness, Globalization, Individualism, Freedom

Introduction

The White Tiger provides a darkly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy.

Adiga says his novel "attempt[s] to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India - the voice of the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the exigence for The White Tiger was to capture the unspoken voice of people from "the Darkness" - the impoverished areas of rural India, and he "wanted to do so without sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually.

The White Tiger takes place in modern day India. The novel's protagonist, Balram Halwai is born in Laxmangarh, Bihar, a rural village in "the Darkness". Balram narrates the novel as a letter, which he wrote in seven consecutive nights and addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. In his letter, Balram explains how he, the son of rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman, describing himself as a successful entrepreneur. Balram begins the novel by describing his life in Laxmangarh. There he lived with his grandmother, parents and brother and extended family. He is a smart child; however, he is forced to quit school in order to help pay for his cousin sister's dowry. He begins to work in a teashop with his brother in Dhanbad. While working in the teashop he begins to learn about India's government and economy from the customers' conversations. Balram describes himself as a bad servant and decides that he wants to become a driver.

Balram learns how to drive and gets a job driving Ashok, the son of the Stork, the local landlord. During a trip back to his village Balram disrespects his grandmother and tells the reader and the Chinese Premier that in the next eight months he intends to kill his boss. Balram moves to New Delhi with Ashok and his wife Ms Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New Delhi, Balram is exposed to the extensive corruption of India's society, including the government. In New Delhi the separation between poor and wealthy becomes even more evident by the juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers.

One night Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family eventually decides to frame Balram for the hit and run. The police, however, corrupt and lazy, tell them that no one reported a child missing so that luckily no further inquiry is done. Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government itself. Balram then decides that the only way that he will be able to escape India's "Rooster Coop" will be by killing and robbing Ashok. One raining day he murders Ashok by bludgeoning him with a broken liquor bottle. He then manages to flee to Bangalore with his young nephew. There he bribes the police in order to help start his own driving service. When one of his drivers kills a bike messenger Balram pays off the family and police. Balram explains that his family was almost certainly killed by the Stork as retribution for Ashok's murder. At the end of the novel Balram rationalizes his actions by saying that his freedom is worth the lives of Ashok and his family and the monetary success of his new taxi company.

I found it ironic that Balram goes through such trouble to break out of the coop (which is something he claims only a White Tiger can do) but in actuality all he was doing was moving from the group of people associated with the darkness to the group of people associated with the light. He goes through many names in the novel and finally once he "breaks out of the coop" he ends up using the name Ashok. Ashok was the man so wrapped up in the coop he had no idea he was even in it and that was Balram very reason for killing him. Balram never actually breaks out of the coop, to me it seemed as if he had dug himself further into it, and taking on this name symbolized that.

So Personally I saw that the theme was more: "don't play into societies views, remain an individual" (the white tiger, rare, his true alias, the only name that fits the main character throughout the novel, ace in a generation).

Major Themes

Globalization

The White Tiger takes place in the modern day world where increased technology has led to world globalization, and India is no exception. In the past decade, India has had one of the fastest booming economies. Specifically Americanization in India has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. To satisfy Pinky's want for American culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram simply move to Gurgaon instead of back to America. Globalization has assisted in the creation of an American atmosphere in India. Ashok justifies this move by explaining "Today it's the modernist suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls—each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her". By blackmailing Ram Parsad, the other driver, Balram is promoted and drives Ashok and Pinky to their new home. Ashok is even convinced India is surpassing the USA, "There are so many more things I could do here than in New York now...

The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years". Balram is noticing the rapid growth as well. From the beginning of his story he knows that in order to rise above his caste he should become an entrepreneur. Although his taxi service is not an international business, Balram plans to keep up with the pace of globalization and change his trade when need be. I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today.' Balram's recognition of the increasing competition resulting from globalization contributes to his corruption.

Individualism
A white tiger symbolizes power and majesty in East Asian cultures, such as in China and Japan. It is also a symbol for individualism and uniqueness. Balram is seen as different from those he grew up with. He is the one who got out of the "Darkness" and found his way into the "Light". Throughout the book, there are references to how Balram is very different from those back in his home environment. He is referred to as the "white tiger" (which also happens to be the title of the book).

Freedom
In an interview with Aravind Adiga, he talked about how "The White Tiger" was a book about a man's quest for freedom. Balram, the protagonist in the novel, worked his way out of his low social caste (often referred to as "the Darkness") and overcame the social obstacles that limited his family in the past. Climbing up the social ladder, Balram sheds the weights and limits of his past and overcomes the social obstacles that keep him from living life to the fullest that he can. In the book, Balram talks about how he was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. The novel is somewhat of a memoir of his journey to finding his freedom in India's modern day capitalist society. Towards the beginning of the novel, Balram cites a poem from the Muslim poet Iqbal where he talks about slaves and says "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." Balram sees himself embodying the poem and being the one who sees the world and takes it as he rises through the ranks of society, and in doing so finding his freedom.

Social class/caste
The book shows a modern day, capitalist Indian society with free market and free business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, there are social castes. The novel portrays India's society as very negative towards the lower social caste. Balram refers to it as the "Darkness". When Balram was asked which caste he was from, he knew that it could ultimately cause a biased stance in his employer and determine the future of his employment. There is definitely a big difference seen in Balram's lower caste from back home and his current higher caste in their lifestyles, habits, and standards of living. This novel is showing how our economic system today creates socioeconomic gaps that create a big division in society. It limits opportunity, social mobility, health, and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all. There is a big difference in the amount of money spread around in society today and this book is alluding to that fact.

The Indian Family
In an interview with *The Guardian,* Adiga emphasizes the importance of family in Indian society. "If you're rude to your mother in India, it's a crime as bad as stealing would be here," he explains. For Balram to abandon his family, then, is perhaps his greatest crime. "This is a shameful and dislocating thing for an Indian to do," Adiga remarks of his protagonist. Balram also understands the severity of his actions. Fear for his family is the largest obstacle he must overcome to carry out Mr. Ashok's murder. In the days before, he has visions – imagining a buffalo in the street blaming him for the deaths of his family. Even after he becomes a businessman in Bangalore, he goes to the temple to pray for their spirits.

China's Relationship to India
At the beginning of the novel, Balram mentions to the Premier that China is the only nation he admires besides Afghanistan and Abyssinia. Why? Because he read in a book called *Exciting Tales of the Exotic East* that these are the only 3 countries never to be ruled by outsiders. He dubs China the "freedom-loving nation," a place that has never been subject to a master-slave relationship with the West. But although he hears on All India Radio that "you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect," Balram observes that China does not have entrepreneurs – hence the Premier's visit to Bangalore. China, then, becomes a foil to India, which he describes as a nation with "no drinking water, electricity, sewage, public transportation …" but chock full of entrepreneurs. For this reason, Balram tells the Premier his story, believing that China and India are destined to become the next great superpowers. "In 20 years' time, it will just be us brown and yellow men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the whole world."

Lightness and Darkness
Perhaps Balram's favorite motif is the duality of "Light" and "Dark." From the very beginning, he attempts to navigate from his hometown in "The Darkness" to become a member of urban society. Light, then, becomes a multifaceted symbol of time (the future), wealth (lots of it), location (Bangalore), and obligation (none) – while Darkness represents the past, poverty, rural India – and most importantly – loyalty to family and master.

These themes battle each other throughout the novel. Even after he has established himself in Bangalore, he continues to seek ways to differentiate himself from the "Darkness." When 1 of his White Tiger drivers runs over a boy, he visits the family and offers their surviving son a job. He realizes this decision may make him appear weak, but he argues he has no choice. "I can't live the way the Wild Boar and the Buffalo and the River lived, and probably *still* live, back in Laxmangarh. I am in the Light Now."

REFERENCES

Adiga, Arvind (2008). The White Tiger. New Delhi. Harper Collins, Publishers India. | 2. Naipaul,V.S (1964). An Area of Darkness. London. Andre Deutsch. | 3. Naipaul,V.S (1990). Million Mutinies Now. London. Minerva Paperback. | 4. 2008. Articles from The Hindu Delhi, Literary Review, Nov 2. | 5. 2008. Articles from The New Indian Express, Sunday, 9 November. |