

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: The Autobiography of A Half-Baked Indian (A Postcolonial Reading)

- Ajay Kumar Sharma

Abstract: It was with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* or *Virtue Rewarded* that the epistolary method entered the arena of English Prose Fiction. Since then much water has flowed down the Thames and the Ganges, leading to the degenerated existence of the word, 'virtue', which has become ridiculous in Indian society of postcolonial era. This paper is an attempt to read *The White Tiger* in Postcolonial light.

Keywords: Postcoloniality, The White Tiger, Colonization.

It was with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* or *Virtue Rewarded* that the epistolary method entered the arena of English Prose Fiction. Since then much water has flowed down the Thames and the Ganges, leading to the degenerated existence of the word, 'virtue', which has become ridiculous in Indian society of postcolonial era. Aravind Adiga, in his novel, *The White Tiger*, presents the life story of Balram Halwai alias Munna, a poverty stricken lad-turned taxi driver, sublimated to the status of an entrepreneur, 'the half-baked Indian', in the form of a series of letters, written late at night, to Wen Jiabao, the Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, on the eve of his visit to India. The letter writing is one-sided, for the Premier's reply is conspicuous by its non existence in the novel. The picaresque protagonist, Balram, comes from a lowly origin; he is not well conversant with the affair of books, but the affairs of the world are at his fingers' tip. He is a self-educated and self-made man. He follows the footsteps of those who have earned name and fame, but are made of the same stuff, the half-baked clay. He treads the shortcut to attain the height of economic grandeur by killing Ashok, the son of his master and employer. Ashok's death paves the way for Balram's becoming an entrepreneur. The work has a postcolonial touch, for the author is successful in giving picture of two Indias, the one 'Dark' and the other 'Light'. The first deals with the poverty stricken, down-trodden people of rural India, while the second displays the grandeur of the prosperous urban India. The gulf between the two is so wide that the new entrepreneurs can go to any extent, even that of assassination and betrayal, to become rich in a sudden flight. However, all is not lost; in

spite of phenomenal disparity in wealth “there is very little crime due to poverty at least in India, in comparison with New York, South Africa and Latin America” as Aravind Adiga opines in an interview. This finding forms the conclusion based on first hand reading of the book in the light of the author's judgement. Although the postcolonial criticism emerged only in 1990s as a distinct field of studying literary texts, yet the beginning of it can be traced back to 1961, with the publication of Frantz Fanon's book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, raising the voice of 'cultural resistance' against France's African Empire. The colonized people wanted to reclaim and feel proud of their past, which was twisted by the imperialist colonizers. Hence the postcolonial writers rejected the modern element, which they felt was tainted with the slavish colonial status of their country. Emphasis was laid upon ethnicity as against universal elements in literature. Thus, there came into existence a sort of double identity, which, on one hand was with colonizers and on the other took sides with the suppressed who were trying to raise their heads against the exploitations that they were destined to bear.

'The half-baked Indian' is a key phrase in developing postcolonial perspective to study Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger*, in which Balram Halwai, the protagonist, has been referred to such a calling by his master, and that too in a taunting and derogatory sense. This is how the ball of the narration of Adiga's debut novel is set rolling: “That night, I was lying in bed, inside my mosquito net, thinking about his [Ashok's] words. He was right, sir—I *didn't like the way he had spoken about me* (italics mine), but he was right. 'The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian.' That's what I ought to call my life's story. (Adiga 10) The protagonist of a postcolonial writing often keeps on struggling to establish his identity amidst the forces of oppression and exploitation. This is true in case of Balram, who is no exception to the above statement, as he feels humiliated from within on his master's taunt: “Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skull, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of idea. . .and these half formed ideas bugger one another, makes more half-formed ideas and this what you act on and live with” (10-11). The phrase 'half baked' indicates the growth of the mind of a person who is unable to finish his schooling; it means that formal education cooks the ideas and a man then only becomes learned and intellectually powerful. However, for achieving material success one is required go through a cut throat competition and take risk. The fully-baked mind thinks twice before taking an action or implementing a plan. He further points out that after years of schooling and training the persons with fully formed ideas take orders from the entrepreneurs, as he remarks: “Entrepreneurs are made

from half-baked clay” (11). The title of the novel has a postcolonial touch of revolt in it. If the colonizers can be termed as 'White Elephants', owing to the maintenance, supported on the shoulders of the colonized ones, the 'White Tiger' is synonymous with revolutionaries; they are the rare species flashing only once in a generation in jungle “an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowds of thugs and idiots” (Adiga 35). The narrator of the novel, Balram Halwai, the white tiger, as Joshi says “is a typical Fanonian rebel who can go to any extent to get liberation” (100). Frantz Fanon in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, rightly observes: “. . .there is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist” (5). Hence, for eliminating the oppressor, violence and even killing become necessary in this revolt against oppression and subjugation. Fanon further asserts, “... violence is cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence” (51). Balram wanted to cast off his slavish life which he and his family members were leading since times immemorial. Under the influence Fanonian spirit he revolts against the oppression of his master and finding a proper occasion assassinates him. Having come to Bangalore, as an impersonator of Ashok Sharma, Balram exclaims, “I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness” (Adiga 14). As a postcolonial personage, he would have felt proud of the cultural and glorious heritage of the sacred river Ganga, but, as a colonizer, he considers it to be the mother of darkness, while the vicinity of ocean is the maker of the India of Light: “The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river” (14). The hatred is so deep-rooted that the Chinese Premier is cautioned from taking a dip into the once Holy Ganga, now sweating oil and tar, lest the yellow-skinned leader be contaminated with straw and carrion, as he warns: “No! Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, a soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids” (15). This dualistic approach to national identity establishes the thesis that “... India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of darkness” (14). Yet the narrator has some germs of culture consciousness in him, when Balram recollects his life in the village Laxmangarh, near Bodh Gaya; he tells the Chinese Prime Minister that the township of Bodh Gaya had a lot to do with the making of a Buddhist China; such a consciousness makes him proud of his inhabitance, when he writes:

This is a famous district—world-famous. Your nation's history has been shaped by my district, Mr Jiabao. Surely you've heard of Bodh Gaya—the town where the

Lord Buddha sat under a tree and found his enlightenment and started Buddhism, which then spread to the whole world, including China—and where is it, right here in my home district! Just a few miles from Laxmangarh! (18)

But, this is what had been; the curse of modernity has brought her own evils; the rural upliftment and development exist only in government papers; the sewage bifurcates the two sides of the village commercial transactions; electricity poles are defunct and water taps are broken; thus there is no difference between the colonial and the post colonial India, for corruption had been, and 'is' the way of the world even today. The postcolonial theme of expatriation and homicide as a shortcut to sudden financial rise has been well portrayed by the novelist, when he describes how Balram went to the metropolis of Delhi, became a driver and killed his employer Ashok Sharma, who should have been treated by him as the second father, "I could gloat that I am not just any murderer, but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father), and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer" (Adiga 45). Balram emerges out not as a mere agent of the action of killing; rather he develops his own positive philosophy of murder, when he inscribes:

Here's a strange fact: murder a man, and you feel responsible for his life—*possessive* even. You know more about him than his father and mother; they knew his foetus, but you know his corpse. Only you can complete the story of his life; only you know why his body has to be pushed into the fire before its time, and why his toes curl up and fight for another hour on earth. (46-47)

This is the Hindu concept of the funeral pyre and the existence of soul under the plasma of foetus; however, the strange murderer is not unaware of the Muslim concept of *halal*: "The blood was draining from the neck quite fast—I believe that is the way the Muslims kill their chickens. But then tuberculosis is the worse way to go than this, I assure you" (Adiga 286). The reference to tuberculosis is relevant, for it might have happened to Ashok Sharma, as he was feeling dyspepsia, arising out of surfeit, "I'm sick of the food I eat, Balram. I'm sick of the life I lead. We rich people, we've lost our way, Balram. I want to be a simple man like you, Balram" (238). The analogy of Rooster Coop elucidates successfully the theme of expatriation in *The White Tiger*. At first instance Balram leaves his native village, Laxmangarh, and comes to Delhi in search of livelihood; he becomes a private car driver of Ashok Sharma, son of his master in the village. Seeing the helpless Roosters in the cage and their killings, Balram soon realizes that in old Delhi the life of human beings also is no better than a rooster. Hence, he makes up his mind to get out of

the suffocating situation in which the poor men of India are forced to live. This is the dark side of India; the Brighter India is located in Modern Delhi and Bangalore. This brightness lures Balram's mind and he is thinking of breaking the gate of this cage and to fly over to Bangalore. Having seen the city of Delhi in light, Balram switches over to Bangalore to start a new life of an impostor in the role of deceased Ashok Sharma. Formerly he was a driver to a rich master, but now he is a master of drivers, but with a difference. Unlike his dead master, he seldom treats them as servants, but as his employees; he does not want that they should remain drivers for ever, as he says: "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" (Adiga 302). He realizes that he has come out of the Rooster Coop, of which he was afraid and perturbed, when living at Delhi. Life has taught a practical lesson to him that keeping friends is too dangerous for a 'White Tiger'. In the city of Bangalore also there are people, who "live like animals in a forest do. Sleep in day and then work all night, until two, three, four, five o'clock, depending, because their masters are on the other side of the world, in America" (298). Thus, the postcolonial feel of Indian way of managing affairs is dominant in the novel. Balram sees tomorrow what others see today, while planning to enter into the business of real estate. At last the current relevance of the book is hinted at by Adiga himself: "Anywhere there is an empty apartment, I take a look at it. I wonder, *How much can I get from an American for this in 2010?*" (309).

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