

Cultural Encounters in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

The White Tiger, Booker prize winning novel of 2008, is a portrayal of a society in flux, where various sections of the social order find themselves in unique and complex cultural encounters. Cross-cultural encounters generally refer to the encounters between people of different nations, religions or global regions. However, Arvind Adiga's novel has expressed this cultural encounter within a single nation- India. India, with its diversity is not just one nation culturally; it has so many diverse cultures that, within a nation there are various cultural encounters. In the race towards progress where India is surging ahead economically, there is a part of India that has been left behind. These "have-nots" find themselves in conflict with the privileged classes, and the ensuing encounter poses numerous questions for the reader of *The White Tiger*.

Cultural encounters challenge ideas about cultural homogeneity and the unchanging nature of traditions and society. Any cultural encounter will automatically pose questions about identity. In *The White Tiger*, the novelist portrays Indian society that is transforming due to western influence and the rural India that is not able to cope with this change, finds itself trapped, suffocated, neglected and at the verge of revolt. Balram, the downtrodden protagonist of the novel not only revolts as a result of this cultural encounter, but manages to improve his fate by becoming an entrepreneur defying all social and economic conventions of India. The paper analyses various dimensions of cultural encounters in the novel *The White Tiger*.

Keywords: Cultural encounter, social flux, identity, western influence.

Introduction

Arvind Adiga, was the second youngest writer as well as the fourth debut writer to win the Booker prize in 2008 for *The White Tiger*. *The White Tiger* is an epistolary novel that begins with the protagonist Balram writing a letter to the Chinese Premier Jiabao because Balram, the protagonist of the novel, hears that Jiabao is coming to Bangalore. Balram Halwai narrates his life in a letter, written in seven consecutive nights, explains how he, the son of a rickshaw puller, escaped a life of servitude to become a successful businessman, describing himself as an entrepreneur. This journey of Balram from a weak and oppressed village boy

to that of a wealthy entrepreneur has numerous cultural encounters that change his outlook as well as his understanding of this complex Indian society. It is the same cultural encounter that not only broadens his perspective but also equips him to change his fortune. Through a series of cultural encounters Balram, the village boy is transformed into a self confident and economically strong entrepreneur. He confidently writes in his letter to the Chinese Premier:

"The story of my upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced. But pay attention, Mr. Premier! Fully formed fellows, after twelve years of school and three years of university, wear nice suits, join companies, and take orders from other men for the rest of their lives. Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay."

This half-baked fellow encounters his first ray of hope when the school inspector picks him from the class; he singles out Balram because he is the only one who can read and write. To describe him in these words:

"You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation?"

"The white tiger"

"That's what you are, in this jungle." (30)

Adiga says his novel attempts "to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India — the voice of

the colossal underclass." According to Adiga, the exigency 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."

Cultural Encounters within India

The story of the novel can be analyzed as the series of cultural encounters that Blaram faces, and the subsequent personal, psychological, social and economical changes that he undergoes as a result of these encounters. Along with the protagonist, the readers too have a brush with the cultural diversity and more importantly the social inequality in India as a nation.

"The novel gives the detailed accounts of the Indian society—rural as well as urban and its various facets. Laxamangarh, Gaya, Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore are generic, in fact they represent the portrait of India. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstition, dowry practice, economic disparity, Zamindari system, and exploitation of marginal farmers and landless labourers, rise of Naxalism, corrupt education system, poor health services, tax evading racket, embittered master-servant relationship, prostitution, weakening family structure, and its fallout etc. constitute the basic structure of Indian society which largely forms the Dark image of India.

Adiga left Mangalore in 1991 when his father moved to Australia. After 15 years, returning to the city as a journalist with *Time*, he found it has changed vastly." (Singh 102)

The change in India is not uniform throughout the society. The western culture has a deep impact on the culture of metropolitan cities like Bangalore and Delhi. The behavior of Pinky madam with Ashok is quite a shock for Balram, their driver and the protagonist of the novel, who has emerged from rural India, where traditions and conservative life style has not prepared him for this kind of cultural shock. However, Balram is the white tiger, a unique species, who is not only very observant and clever, but also has desire to out shine the rich class of the cities. He does not necessarily endorse the new way of life he encounters, but he is also not critical of it. He observes the new culture with enchanted detachment, making up his mind to outsmart the so-called smart people of the big cities.

The first step towards freedom from his fate of servitude comes his way when he learns that car drivers are paid well. He becomes a driver who travels throughout Delhi and National Capital Region and in the process he is silent observer of the social drama played out in every nook and corner of the city. The more he sees the world around him, the more he is enticed towards changing his position from a mere observer to that of a key player in this drama called city life.

"Below the thin veneer of a so called booming, growing economy lies the reality of a struggling surviving India in which beats the hearts of millions of aspirational Indians who possess a strong will and aspiration to emerge out of the hell hole into a better world, where humans can live like humans and animals can live like animals." (317) It is thus, that Aravind Adiga creates such an evocatively etched, strikingly real, character of Balram Halwai, the voice of the teeming, poverty stricken Indian, but nonetheless roaring like the aspirational white tiger to achieve his dreams." (Shenoy 117-118)

Cultural Encounter: Rural and Urban

Throughout the novel Adiga has tried to contrast the rural and the urban India into two parts. He writes:

"...India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of Darkness..." (14)

One part of the India of Darkness was Laxmangarh, the village where the protagonist Balram was born and spent his childhood. However, right from childhood he seems to hate the life of poverty and strives to improve his lot by surging ahead in search of a better future.

"The writer presents a riveting tale of the realistic anti-hero Balram Halwai, who although born in the most humble surrounding, harbours a Marlowesque ambition to rise above his predetermined fate to be born and die in "the darkness" and achieves it through his ruthless planning of the murder of his master Ashok." (Deswal 277) The two sides of India are such a contrast that any person

who comes from Darkness to Light, will get a cultural encounter which will change his life. The India of light is very westernized and developed, while the India of Darkness is full of filth, ignorance and poverty. "Adiga has tried to draw a distinct line between darkness and light. When Balram is in Laxmangarh he is residing in darkness, but in Bangalore and Delhi he comes to Light. Everything is supposed to be perfect just like 'mini-America'... (Deswal 278)

Westernization and Indianization

This Americanization in India has played its role in the plot, since it provides an outlet for Balram to alter his caste. To meet Pinky's dream of America's free culture, Ashok, Pinky, and Balram shift to Gurgaon, an Indian city than to America. Globalisation has assisted in the creation of an American atmosphere in India. Ashok justifies this move by explaining

"Today it's the modernest 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". (Adiga 101)

This changed India, with all its contradictions and shocking contrasts when compared to the Australian society, must have made a great impression on Adiga. The result was this novel that gives a series of cultural encounters to the protagonist Balram, in the process he

evolves from an ignorant and innocent lad from the village to a shrewd and worldly wise entrepreneur.

"The novel is replete with scenes that point out to Balram's over riding wish to emulate the class and style of his masters. He sees Ashok, his master wearing a white T shirt with a small design in the centre. Balram then goes out to the local market and does not cease searching till the right T shirt is found. He also buys black shoes and ventures into a mall, half fearing that he will be stopped midway..." (S Shenoy 115)

"The novel exposes the Modern India with shifting values and no morals. In the era of globalisation, everything became commodity where the bond of relationship reached in the position of commodity and everything is for sale. The family relationship is based upon the materialistic prosperity because the western culture injected the poison of decadence in Indian culture. The sex has polluted the brain of almost all the modern people. The master Ashok and his wife Pinky madam in their excited position behave like animals', the master —pushing his hand up and down her thigh'. Even they don't care that they are in car where driver Balaram observes them in the mirror." (Walmiki 103)

Success has no caste, no religion and no colour. Balram's success too is based on murder of his master and stealing his money. Success and morality no longer have any connection in this fast paced rat race of the modern world. Traditions and conventions are sacrificed at the altar of

materialistic gains. Loyalty in relationships is a thing of the past. Relationships are used as a ladder to advance in life. Balram, the *White Tiger*, has transcended the boundaries of class, culture and ethics to roar loudly and proclaim his success.

Conclusion

Cultural encounters, having various dimensions in the novel *The White Tiger*, are present in every phase of the protagonist's journey of life. Balram's voyage from the village of Laxmanghar to the metropolitan city of Bangalore is coloured by the cultural encounters that astonish and perplex him in the beginning. Traversing numerous phases of his life, his journey culminates in a new social identity for himself that is colored by no caste, creed or colour. Materialistic success transformed the village gullible simpleton into an opportunist who even does not hesitate to murder his master for making a bright future for himself. Ultimately "the half baked fellow" becomes a fully mature entrepreneur who is the master of his own destiny.

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