



DEMEANING, DEGRADATION AND DEHUMANISATION IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER

Mrs. Sajula A.

PhD Research Scholar (Part Time)

Chevalier T. Thomas Elizabeth College for Women

Chennai – 600 011

Tamil Nadu

Dr. S. Sridevi

Principal and Professor of English

Chevalier T. Thomas Elizabeth College for Women

Chennai – 600 011

Tamil Nadu

Abstract

Mari Mikkola in *The Wrong of Injustice* argues that “Dehumanization undergirds the wrongfulness of different forms of injustice (oppression, discrimination, domination) in their various contours (sexist, racist, heteronormative, trans*phobic, ableist, and classist injustices)” (2). Reducing someone to something indeed controlling over someone or insulting them are also considered as dehumanizing. The rich always suppress the poor and the poor get into a state of servitude. In Adiga's *The White Tiger*, a vivid representation of class struggle in Indian society is being brought to the limelight. The most important issues in India, that is, poverty, religion, caste and corruption are well portrayed in the novel. Balram Halwai, a village boy is the protagonist whose life can be seen as a journey as he moves from one place to another. He engages himself in various jobs, as a rickshaw puller, coolie, beggar, worker and faces unenviable difficulties. He once steals money after killing his master. Born in a poor family, he later becomes an entrepreneur and establishes his own taxi services. This paper critically examines the savage representation of the suffering Indian masses, who get corrupted by the Indian administrative and social system, firmly lop-sided in favor of the leading class.

Keywords: Angry, Humiliation, ill-treatment, Dignity, Violence, Slavery, Torture, Shame, Recognition, Humanity, Respect, Poverty, injustice.

Full Paper:

Aravind Adiga, a writer and journalist, was raised in India and Australia. He did his education in English literature at Columbia College and Oxford University. Even before becoming a novelist, he pursued both a correspondent for Time Magazine and a financial journalist for the Financial Times. His experience moulded him to distrust in business magazines and have a great interest in literature, where he significantly discusses the economic boom of India in *The White Tiger*. A vivid representation of class struggle in Indian society is being brought to the limelight.

The White Tiger is Adiga's debut novel which won him the prestigious 2008 Booker Prize. He is the fourth Indian writer to win the esteemed award. The text is being criticized for its view on the gloomier side of India on whole. The most important issues in India - poverty, religion, caste and corruption - are screwed up keenly in the novel.

India is one of the most diverse nations in the world, which is almost impenetrable and cannot be restricted within the realms of a single book. But the same India is shown completely from the negative point of view as a place where some people find no food to eat and no shelter to rest as they consume the leftover eateries thrown in dustbins and take them under the flyover. The text appears to be the voice of the poor, downtrodden, the colossal underclass of the world's biggest democracy who face difficulties at various levels of their life.

The White Tiger is narrated in an epistolary form from the first person point of view, the one, Balram Halwai who takes various roles like Car Driver, Coolie, Servant, Philosopher, Entrepreneur and Murderer. His life and experiences are shared to the readers through seven letters in seven nights. He writes these letters under the scattered light of his most likeable chandelier, addressing to His Excellency Wen Jiabao of China who is an official and the one who is planning to visit India in the coming week. Balram tells the terrible story of his life of how he became a successful entrepreneur establishing his own taxi services. He is proud to have lifted himself from darkness to light, from poorness to richness. He struggles against his own poverty, oppression, and inhuman misery throughout his life and it was by his own wit that made him survive in all circumstances. He is not able to live a human life as he is surrounded by poverty and desperation on the whole.

In *The Wrong of Injustice*, Mari Mikkola, a feminist philosopher at university of Oxford, argues that "Dehumanization undergirds the wrongfulness of different forms of injustice (oppression, discrimination, domination) in their various contours (sexist, racist, heteronormative, trans*phobic, ableist, and classist injustices)" (2). Born in the dark heart of India, Laxmangarh, Balram is not being named officially by his parents as they find no time to name their child. He has been called "Munna" from birth which means "boy" (p. 13). It was at the time of school admission, he was being named Balram by his teacher whose name is Krishna which symbolically says that "he was the sidekick of the god Krishna" (p. 14). Not even his birth date is recorded, as it is given to him accidentally during an election day as eighteen years old to make him vote. Thus his identity, being created officially by one after another incident gives a recognition of his meaningful existence.

Balram's father, a rickshaw-puller, really works hard for the family's survival with a plan. He says, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine – at least one – should live like a man" (p. 30). Balram has seen many rickshaw-pullers who are, "thin, sticklike men, leaning forward from the seat of a bicycle, as they pedal along a carriage bearing a pyramid of middle-class flesh – some fat man with fat wife and all their shopping bags and groceries" and continues that rickshaw-pullers are – "a human beast of burden" (p. 27).

Balram's schooling shows yet another story of poverty where he degrades his dignified teacher for his actions. His school gives free food for, "every boy three rotis, yellow daal, or pickles at lunchtime" (p. 33) but not offered as the schoolteacher used to steal the lunch money. As he has a legitimate excuse that he has not been paid for months, he is not questioned when he steals and sells the free school uniforms in the neighbouring villages.

Instead of finding fault with him, the people are proud of him for he cleared the heap so cleanly. The situation all around teaches him to be disloyal.

Khor quotes from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Righting Wrongs," and points two of her strong arguments that: "(1) human rights mean having or claiming and dispensing rights; (2) the stronger must right the wrongs of the weak" and continues,

These central premises include (1) with rights come responsibilities; (2) the powerful—often the state—must protect the rights of the less powerful—the poor, the discriminated, and the tortured; and (3) the claim by the powerful to protect the less powerful can also be an excuse to dominate them." (41).

But here in the text, the rich always suppress the poor and the poor get into a state of servitude.

Balram has seen many poor serve the rich throughout their life. As he is a member of the city of Darkness, he has to consider Hanuman as his favorite god as "he was the faithful servant of the god Rama ... a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion (p. 19). He never uses a capital 'G' for god in his narration. It shows that he had to blindly follow the footsteps of his ancestors and their principles, though he disrespects their faith. A non-believer of god, he is forced to buy cheap hanuman and Rama's statues to prove as a great devotee to his employers and other servants.

Balram had a great admiration of a man named Vijay, the bus conductor. Though he was born in a family of pig herds, the lowest of the low caste, he made up his life by befriending politicians and is considered as the first entrepreneur in the circle. At each time he meets Vijay, there's a transformation at his end, as he gradually develops from one position to another. Sometimes, he made the landlord bow before him which is considered as, "The marvels of democracy!" (p.103). But it was later commented by the rich as, "we shouldn't let him treat us like this any more – like we're his slaves" (p. 106). A slight difference in the regular society affects the rich while the poor face it throughout their life.

To become rich by himself, Balram tries his hand at various jobs. Though a bright student and being appreciated by a school inspector, his schooling comes to an end when the family borrows money for one of his cousin's marriages. He is taken to a tea shop straight from the school and is forced to smash coals, and wipe tables. He keeps on trying to join a construction or digging job, but gets rejected for having a leaner body. He has been shamed for his thin posture though he pleads, "Give me a chance, sir – my body is small but there's a lot of fight in it – I'll dig for you, I'll haul cement for you, I'll—" (p. 55) but is beaten up on the left ear.

Finally, he finds that being a car driver is more profitable than any other job. He pays a fee to learn driving from an old driver and sets out to find an employer for him at rich bungalows and finds one. Finding a job itself is not an easy task. These poor people are degraded based on their caste at all times. Balram being a 'Halwai' is designated only for making sweets. His caste has been commented by the car driver who finds fault with his driving, "You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?" (p. 56). At another incident he is being asked by his employer, "'Halwai'...top or bottom?" (p. 62). The employer says, "All our employers are top caste. It won't hurt to have one or two bottom castes working for us" (p. 65). These Halwai's are designed only to make sweets and tea as it runs in their blood. When India attained independence in August, 1947, all the rich animals were let free to have stolen the poor. Balram's grandfather, a sweet stall owner, has been reduced to nothing as the rich looters steal his shop.

He also hears the story of his new employer's son getting kidnapped once by the Naxals and is tortured to death. To pay the death off, the employer punishes his domestic servant as he is supposed to have the role to guard his infant. Not only the servant has been tortured and shot dead, his brother and wife, his sister were all beaten to death and their house is set on fire. Thus,

... we dehumanize people by taking a derogatory attitude toward them. But denigrating others falls short of denying their humanity. Often, it involves judging them to be inferior human beings rather than subhuman animals. An inferior human is still human. Finally, dehumanization is sometimes equated with cruel or degrading treatment. It's said, for instance, that torturing a person, or systematically disrespecting them, is tantamount to dehumanizing them. (Smith, 18)

Knowing this, he soon joins the family as a car driver 2, only to find a complete servant. He has to sweep the floor, make tea, clean cobwebs, chase the cow in the compound, bath and comb two house Pomeranians (Puddles and Cuddles), often giving foot massages to the employer's father or supervising driver 1 when he goes to buy liquor as there are chance for him to run away with the bottle. Though he has the chance to play cricket with the grandson of the family, he is not supposed to win. Once when the boy shouts, "I'm Azharuddin, captain of India" (p.70), he gets snapped by the grandfather for calling himself a muslim rather than Gavaskar, a hindu, without knowing that the driver 1 is indeed a muslim by birth but acts a Hindu as he is in great need of a job. He is fired when the truth is uncovered. The rich totally forget that humans are humans, though they belong to any caste or creed.

A servant has to do his work continuously. Whenever the employer, Mongoose, the brother of the house watches Balram loitering simply would immediately be called to give yet another new work. The family treats animals as human and human as animals. Balram is not given significance when compared to the pet dogs of the house. Once he took the pets for a walk, the watchman shouts at him, "Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!" (p. 78) often, he has to understand all of his expressions that is untold, "the way dogs understand their masters" (p. 112)

Balram remains faithful for he considers himself as, "the servant-god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress, Ram and Seetha" (p. 46) protecting his master's good name. He encounters so many issues being with the rich. He finds that he has not attained the trust from his employers. The rich greatly trust the superior officers and bribe tax officials with half a million rupees, while they could never accept a servant to take a one rupee coin, "that's how you corrupt servants, it starts with one rupee" (p. 159). They are not supposed to turn on the air conditioner or the music of the car when they stay on their own in it. They are even scrutinized in reading the meter as they never trust the servant to be loyal. They are even mocked by the way they talk and behave and are under the suspicious eyes of the employers. They joke and have fun at the cost of them. Such remarks dishearten any loyal servant. These are the insults they face in their servitude.

Though Balram serves his masters at his best in every possible way, they never considered him as a member of the family. This, he understands, when he is being asked by his masters to go to jail for the murder committed by his master while driving. Infact, they try to persuade him by saying, "the jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters" and continue to say that they will sure, "go about bragging. Their boy Balram had taken the fall, gone to Tihar Jail for his employer. He was loyal as a dog. He was the perfect servant" (p. 170). He feels like the rooster coop under the control of the butcher which renders the best example for the working class people under the control of the masters. The roosters know they are the next in line for butchering.

A perfect employee will never take a single rupee from his master's money though he's given a responsibility of handling money to someone. It may be "a fat wad of cash the size of a brick" or "a black suitcase" with millions of money because "Indians are the world's most honest people" (p. 174-5). There are other cases as the newspapers read that the taxi driver finds a black bag with million dollars and he hands it over to the policeman. These types of servants are. "no Gandhi, he's human, he's you and me. But he's in the Rooster coop" (175). Balram knows well that,

A handful of men in the country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse (p.176)

When asked a question whether he can break the coop, the reply is when, “who is prepared to see his family destroyed – hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters – can break out of the coop.” (p. 177). But Balram escapes from going to jail as there is no complaint filed against the accident. It is at that time the madam of the house, Pinky, returns back to America breaking her marriage and leaving the master to go wild. He turns a drunkard, goes after whores and bribes the income tax officials.

The secrets of the family are not let out to other than the family members though the other drivers pulled Balram's mouth, the loyalty is unbreakable but soon finds his condition miserable when his own innocent master turns corrupt. He too gets corrupted in mind and starts thinking of cheating his master as he is forced to settle rich in life. He siphons petrol to sell it, when the car gets repaired, he gets a corrupted mechanic who inflated the price, learns to sell leftover liquor bottles, turns the master's car into a taxi thus he starts to steal with rage and turns his own master. When he is caught, he slits the master's throat and steals money. When Balram disappears after slitting the throat of Mr. Ashok, his employer, the police during investigation brutally “bullied the rickshaw pullers, and woken up the schoolteacher ... smashed up a grocery shop or two” (p. 39) Thus the poor are treated worse than the animals. He even bribes the police to get ready with his new chauffeuring business for call center workers in Bangalore.

In many ways Balram acts just like his former master Mr. Ashok, even taking the name “Ashok” moves to Bangalore. He becomes a member of the upper class himself. When once his driver, Mohammad Asif, accidentally kills a poor young boy while driving, Balram calls the police and the charges are cleared for he is in the position to bribe the police. Balram takes the responsibility of the killing and goes to compensate the family of the boy. He offers money as well as a job for their older son at his company. Balram says, “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” (302). Though the text does not end in a perfect happy way, it seems hopeful. Coming out of poverty, he becomes more energetic, though he distances himself from where he came, and this allows him to act morally more often.

There are minor incidents in the text which reveals the conditions of the poor. Whenever a fight breaks out between the Naxal terrorists and the landlords, it is the poor “the small people like us were getting caught in between. There were private armies on each side, going around to shoot and torture people suspected of sympathizing with the other” (p. 85). The life of a poor person is not guaranteed, as he is suspected in every single case. Once Vijay and a policeman, without any particular reason, “knocked the rickshaw-puller down ... beating him, they hit with their sticks ... They took turns. Vijay hit him and the policeman stamped on his face ...” until the body of the poor, “stopped wriggling and fighting back” (p. 102). Reducing someone to something indeed controlling over someone or insulting them are also considered as dehumanizing.

There are sets of animal images and other images are used in various pages describing people – Balram himself is compared to the rare “White Tiger” by the school Inspector for his cleverness and a country mouse by the gang of other drivers. The women waiting behind the doors for their husbands who come with money in their pockets are compared to the wild cats who wait for the slab of flesh. These women feed their husbands only after they feed their buffaloes. The men working in tea shops are considered as human spiders while the girl selected for Balram is called a plump duck. One Mr. Mukesh sir, a Mongoose and Pinky Madam as a magical thing, “brought home from New York, like his accent and the fruit-flavored perfume he put on his face after shaving” (p. 76)

Calling people names is an effort to hurt or humiliate them. It's the use of language as a weapon. But dehumanizing a person involves judging them to be less than human. It's intended as a description rather than as an attack, and as such is a departure from reality—a form of self-deception. (Smith, 15).

Balram's disrespect for the rich men, who are the landlords' of his village, is shown by the way he names four of them - Buffalo, Stork, White Boar and Raven (p 25) though he pays attention to write it in capital letters each time, the grudge that he has for the rich demeans his attitude towards them.

There are other derogatory terms like 'Monkey in uniforms' (131), 'grinning like donkey' (143), 'monkeys gaze' (153) and other group mockings of the junior servant by the senior servants which is inhumane and hurts the particular person psychologically. Being poor, he is not even allowed inside a mall, where the rich loiter. "Am I not a human being too?" (p. 148), a man in sandals explodes once out in the mall. Balram too never has the guts to enter the mall, until he wears a T-shirt and shoes, he is kept at a distance. The successful entry is made secretive with a throbbing heart of being caught red handed.

Khor states that, "Once he is rich, his wealth and position allow him to act ethically, or so he claims." (55) The rich are so far removed from the situation of the poor that they no longer even think of the poor as human. "Halwai's rage stems not only from his sense of righteous indignation that those in the master class like Mr. Ashok have so much, while those in the servant class like himself have so little."(Khor, 50). He turned from a sweet, innocent fool to a fellow of debauchery, depravity and wickedness. If the injustice of the master class was immoral, Halwai's methods of redressing the injustice seems equally so. (Khor, 44).

Rather than looking for explanations for why all people deserve to be treated with compassion and respect, we ought to be working at creating a world in which people are treated with compassion and respect (Smith, 262). Love for humanism is one of the progressive measures that the country needs to make it a better place to live in.

References:

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008.

[Khor, Lena](#). "Can the Subaltern Right Wrongs?: Human Rights and Development in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*". *South Central Review*. Vol. 29. No. 1 & 2, Spring & Summer 2012, John Hopkins University Press. pp. 41-67.

Mikkola, Mari. *The Wrong of Injustice Dehumanization and Its Role in Feminist Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016

Smith, David Livingstone. *less than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave and Exterminate Others*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011.