
**A Socio-cultural Study of Indian Society as Presented in Aravind
Adiga's *The White Tiger***

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Abstract:

In the research paper entitled *A Socio-cultural Study of Indian Society as Presented in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger*, an attempt has been made to interpret the social and cultural frame of Indian society as presented by the novelist. In a socio-cultural study, a study of the interaction of the people with one another is generally made so that the culture, society and environment of a society may be understood and interpreted. The term 'sociocultural' involves a variety of societal and cultural influences which leave their impact on the behaviors, ideologies and emotions of the people belonging to that particular society. Many Indian English novelists have dealt with the socio-cultural environment in their novels. For example: RK Narayan, in his novel *The Guide*, portrays the Indian ways of life and its culture through the presentation of typical characters and atmosphere. Arundhati Roy, in *The God of Small Things*, presents the socio-cultural milieu by portraying the feminist progression in India. Salman Rushdie, in his epic work *Midnight Children* and other subsequent works presents the cultural hybridity of the postcolonial society of India. Mulk Raj Anand expresses his concerns over the socio-cultural aspects in Indian society in his novels. Vikram Seth explores various socio-cultural aspects of Indian society in his works. He presents a culturally diverse society in his mega novel *A Suitable Boy*. In the present research paper, an effort has been made to assess the impact of social and cultural surroundings which shape the character of an individual who faces traumatic conditions and so struggles to cope with his situations in contemporary society. His behavior becomes reactionary in his socio-cultural background and often ends up in absurdities, posing threats to the socio-cultural set-up in the society. When an individual's existence is neglected, he or she makes efforts to survive in the socio-cultural system.

Keywords: Culture, societal, class and caste structures, ideologies, absurdities, set-up.

Introduction:

In the novel *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga delineates the socio-cultural image of contemporary society through the presentation of the life of a lower-class man who is caught up in the web of the politics of his own community. In this novel, the author depicts the social conditions of India in the backdrop of the two contradictory pictures of India – visualized free India after the independence movement and the contemporary India which is in the pursuit of modernity. In the present times India's rich heritage of culture is being relegated to the background by the onslaught of modernism in our society and a huge gap is being created between the rich and the poor.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga expresses his concern over the discrimination of the poor from the rich by the modernized traditions and customs in the society. Class and caste systems have given rise to the imperial barricades in the path of democratic socialism and financial fairness that victimize the poor. The poor are becoming more poor and powerless while the elite capitalist class is exploiting them. Adiga tries to bring home the point that the predominance of class and caste structures in the society is responsible for the inequality and discrimination against the poor. In *The White Tiger* Adiga presents a society which is hegemonic and theoretically dogmatic because its people are mad after money and power. Durga K. writes in her dissertation *Reading India as Represented in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger: A Socio-cultural Analysis*:

The societal set-up that Adiga represents, as an image of contemporary India, can be viewed as the author's voicing of his resistance to the deformed state of the Indian polity. Through the text, the writer makes an attempt to forefront the harrowing realities of the blanketed parts of rural India. Instances of socio-economic inequality, injustices, class and caste divides and so on are seen recurring throughout the narrative making it a serious work of social criticism. (14)

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga expresses his concern on the havoc created by the division of class on the basis of money and power resulting in the loss of moral values in Indian society. He raises his voice of protest against the misuse of money and power by the rich who exploit the poor by creating a false propaganda of the progress of the country. He emphatically says that the rich have been using the poor people to their advantage for centuries whereas they have absolutely ignored the fundamental rights and needs of the poor. Once they gain power, they never bother about the life of poor people who are socially and culturally crushed by injustice done against them. According to Radhika Chopra who writes:

Aravind Adiga in his Booker prize winning novel, *The White Tiger*, deals in fictional disguise with the social structures and relationships, process of social change or the lack of which creates various ills affecting our society. The novel provides

samples of gross malpractices in Indian democracy and society. It is a social criticism focusing on poverty and misery of India, and its religio-socio-political conflicts, presented through humour and irony. (Social Criticism in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* 30)

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga portrays the rural as well as urban life of the people of India in the backdrop of India's socio-cultural set-up. Consciously or unconsciously, he means by rural India, the 'India of darkness' while from urban India he means the 'India of the light'. The protagonist Balram Halwai belongs to the poorest section of rural India; his life is full of misfortunes and hardships and he has to make efforts to cope with his poverty. He narrates the story of the protagonist from his birth to his death and boldly presents the heinous crimes committed by rich people against the poor. Adiga exposes the corruption which is rampant in the political corridors and leave a detrimental impact on the social as well as cultural fabric of the society which faces unhealthy repercussions in the familial relations. There takes place a huge class and caste divide among the people.

Through the depiction of an Indian village which becomes a place of misfortunes, poverty and humiliation, Adiga exposes the indignities, exploitations, oppression and discrimination of the poor in *The White Tiger*. He expresses his concern over the disturbing picture of the poor villagers who go through ordeals there. Balram says to Jiabao:

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country... Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand Your Excellency that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river. (*The White Tiger* 14)

Here, Adiga presents a distorted picture of the society and its culture by referring to the Ganga as "the river of death" (15). Adiga goes on to disregard the cultural value of the Ganga and tries to show that it is a symbol of hatred devoid of any cultural values. Balram says: ...[the] river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it... I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness. (*The White Tiger* 15)

Adiga also expresses the loss of the cultural values in the religious and cultural rites that are performed at the time of cremation, on the banks of the holy river. When Balram's mother dies, a grand ritualistic method of wrapping her body from head to toe in a saffron silk coffin is described by the author. The covering of the dead body with rose petals and jasmine garlands, is explained by Adiga through the words of Balram who says, "Her death was so grand though her life was miserable." (*The White Tiger* 16) here Adiga presents his critique on the cultural

rites that are performed in the way as if death is a grand even whether real life of the deceased was miserable. Adiga expresses his disgust through the words of Balram:

As the fire ate away the satin, a pale foot jerked out, like a living thing; the toes, which were melting in the heat, began to curl up, offering resistance to what was being done to them...it would not burn. My mother wasn't going to let them destroy her...I looked at the ooze, and I looked at my mother's flexed foot, and I understood...This mud was holding her back...She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes were flexed and resisting; but the mud was sucking her in... (The White Tiger 18)

Here, Aravind Adiga tries to bring home the point that cultural values and practices lose their sanctity if the dead person has been compelled to lead a miserable life and has no escape from the misfortunes when alive.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga also expresses his bitter hatred against the political system of holding elections in the interest of the cunning politicians who exploit the poor to gain power. Aravind Adiga believes that elections after every five years happen in India like a disease that destroys the social and cultural harmony of the people. He makes Balram speak:

These are the three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera, and election fever. This last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in. The Great Socialist's enemies seemed to be stronger in this election than at the last one. They had made pamphlets, and went about on buses and trucks with microphones, and announced they were going to topple him over and drag the River Ganga and everyone who lived on its banks out of the Darkness and into the Light. (The White Tiger 98)

Here, Aravind Adiga tries to bring home the point that the dreams of wealthy politicians are fulfilled at their own sweet will, while poor people struggle throughout their life to escape from the hardships of poverty and hunger. They also wish to be rich and powerful, but that happens only when they resort to illicit means of getting money. Thus, while portraying the life of Balram, Adiga successfully highlights the importance of social as well as cultural values of the Indian people. Basically, he gives emphasis on the social welfare of the people by contrasting the luxurious life of the rich with the troubles of the poor people of our society. Aravind Adiga lays bare the prejudice of the rich against poor people belonging to lower class and caste in society. The novelist uses the title of white tiger symbolically with the purpose of projecting the emerging image of new India. In the world of animals, white tiger is an animal rarely seen. Dr. Yakaiah Kathy comments:

The meaning of the novel itself gives a clear idea that it is an exhausting struggle for the low class people to break out of their oppressive cultural background (of upper caste domination)... It also suggests that only a small percentage of poor

people will prosper in their life like the *white tiger* in the Indian traditional society. (57)

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga continuously uses the symbols of 'Light' and 'Darkness'; Balram Halwai takes the Ganga River for darkness and so calls it by the phrase "the Ganga of Black." In his letter he warns the visiting President of China not to bathe in the water of the Ganga because it is full of garbage, bodies of dead animals and birds, acidic water etc. Here, Adiga passes sarcastic comments on the dirty condition of the Ganga which is supposed to be holy, but paradoxically, he hints at its dark side which causes diseases and deaths instead of purifying the soul and bodies of the people. It is seen that most poor people live at its bank and lead a very troublesome life full of servitude.

Aravind Adiga points out that Indian villages and cities represent light and darkness respectively. Everything connected with rural areas such as name, family, class and caste - is equal to darkness because most of the people are poor there while the city stands for light, that is, wealth, pleasures, enjoyments all pertain to the brighter side of things. In rural areas one cannot shift to any other work. According to Shakti Batra who writes:

The representatives of light and darkness are India's cities and villages. In the countryside, ruled by darkness, the name, family, caste and religion means everything to people. But all these distinctions disappear in the cities, where people are either rich or poor. Taking up another job than what caste allows is frowned upon and not tolerated in the India of Darkness. Balram and his family belong to the lowest caste, halwais (sweet makers), so they are doomed to live in utter poverty and destitution; they work in the fields belonging to the high-caste landlords and "swallow their daily wages". (Aravind Adiga: *The White Tiger* 118-19)

Through the life of the protagonist Balram Halwai, Aravind Adiga depicts the socio-cultural reality of contemporary Indian society in which poor people lead extremely miserable lives. He presents the development that has taken place in India where village life has been replaced by urban life. Still the caste based politics has not changed and the rifts among the people have also increased. Dr. Harleen Kaur Ruprah comments on the treatment of caste-based politics in *The White Tiger* in the following words:

The book suggests that an understanding of the caste-based identity can also release the caste-class tension. It serves historically as a gateway, ideologically and materially, to successful enterprise. Marwari business classes relied on family networks to advance economic strategies that were offensive to British observers who repeatedly attempted to undermine them as unregulated gambling. Crucially, at the turn of the century, some of the

greatest industrialists under British colonialism utilized their caste connections to advance their class agenda. (88)

To become rich, Balram uses the criminal strategy of caste cruelty against his relatives. Aravind Adiga means to say that poor people become the victim of poverty which converts them into criminals who are born in the slum where the network of criminals prosper. Thus, corruption in politics and poverty of the people, living in slums turn them into criminals. Balram is the representative character of such poor men who are the victim of injustice, corruption, and of course of poverty. Balram's protest should be taken as the voice of all the downtrodden people who lead a life of humiliation in miserable gloominess. Laxmikant Kapgate and Dr. Dipak Dharne remark:

Through this novel, Adiga exhibits the sensible and agonizing picture of contemporary India. *The White Tiger*, a novel that not only explores the inequalities between India's uncompromising commercial urban elite class and the persecuted rural poor but also exposes the excruciating world of the subjugated. (The portrayal of India: An Exploration of Arvind Adiga's selected Novels Web)

In the novel *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga presents the reality of Indian socio-cultural conditions which have created a huge gap between the rich and the poor. This is the reality of Indian social ethos which has become a prey to the spirit of consumerism and materialism in the name of the advancement of technology. He lays stress on the fact that Indian society and its culture are on the verge of losing the humanitarian quality resulting in the loss of the dignity of poor people.

In his novel *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga raises his voice against the social and cultural discrimination of the poor people by the rich. He also focuses on the ways of corrupt politicians who exploit the poor and innocent people. He boldly discusses the issues pertaining to the socially crushed poor people so that justice may be brought to them. Thus, *The White Tiger* becomes a novel of social criticism in which the misery of the poor who lose their cultural identity in the contemporary society in India. He has openly attacks the inequality and difference between rich people enjoying power and comforts, and poor people who are groveling in abject misery.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga also raises an alarm at the consequences which may turn these poor young people into criminals because extreme destitution may make them inconsiderate to the moral values and involve them in illegal activities and even commit murders to become rich and powerful. This is the biggest alarming situation in our society. The novelist has brought home the point that this discrimination must be stopped before the times comes when the situation becomes out of control and morality and virtue lose their existence in this materialistic society and world.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga has exposed the heinous reality of the evils which are rampant in Indian society. In fact, it is the dark heart of India, particularly the political system that is full of corruption. Bribery is so common that one cannot get even the smallest work without bribing the concerned person. In fact, bribery has become the trademark of the corrupt political system. Adiga exposes the society which is class-based society and is split into two classes – rich and poor; rich class keeps it belly full with money and other satisfactions attained with the help of power while poor people have small bellies without any food or anything to eat. The irony is that rich people devour the food of the poor who cannot even raise their voice in the protest against these usurpers. In a way, the people in Indian society have surrendered before the male dominance, and cannot lead their life as free persons. And if they have to become rich, they have to resort to illegal means of crimes such as murder or other criminal acts. This is done by the protagonist Balram Halwai who murders his boss by slitting his throat and becomes a rich entrepreneur without any qualm.

Aravind Adiga gives a clear-cut message: if these poor people are not given their due, they will finally turn themselves into criminals and ultimately society will become absolutely immoral and corrupt. The onus falls on the shoulders of those people who should not deny these people their rights. Aravind Adiga makes his point clear that social justice should be done without any discrimination of being poor or rich, male or female. He lays emphasis on the requirement of social justice so that the deteriorated society may be reorganized and its culture may be retained. For this, the poor working people should be given rights and powers so that they may join the mainstream of the society and get satisfaction in their efforts.

In *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga scrutinizes the contemporary cultural practice of following Hindu religion India and declares that the religion does not lessen the sorrows of the poor, despite the fact that it is ancient and has been practiced for centuries as a reverent tradition:

It is an ancient and venerated custom of people in my country to start a story by praying to a Higher Power...There are so many choices...the Muslims have one god. The Christians have three gods. And we Hindus have 36,000,004 divine ...for me to choose from them. (The White Tiger 8)

Thus, in *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga exposes the rottenness of the socio-cultural system whose corrupt practices have engulfed the social and cultural values leaving the poor in miserable conditions. The author, in a sarcastic tone, declares that in our society which pronounces advancement and growth, poor people fall prey to the cunningness of the rich and the powerful resulting in the destruction of the richness of Indian society and its culture. Adiga criticizes the socio-cultural practices of India and its set-up. Its practice of the caste and class divide gets a fuller treatment in *The White Tiger*. He vehemently declares that caste and class have ever been

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responsible for the injustices in any given culture and society. In the portrayal of socio-cultural India, Adiga provides a larger space for the discussions on caste and class systems.

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