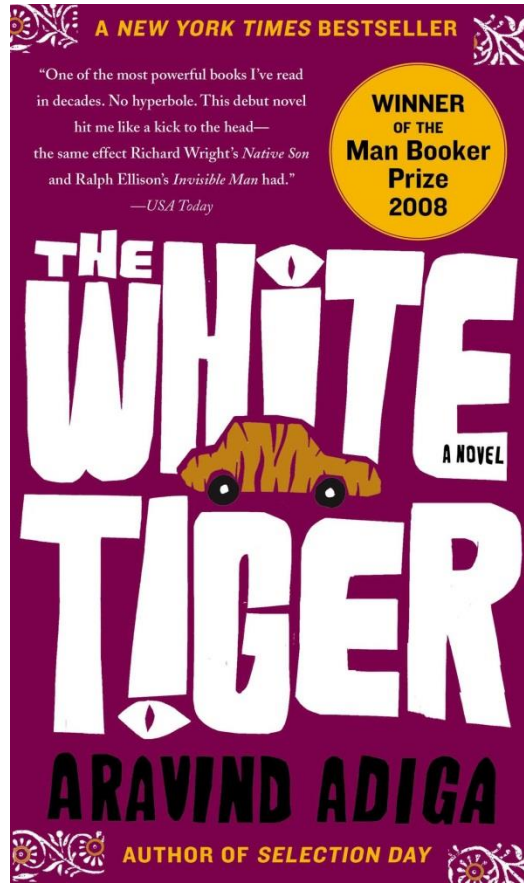


Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*:
A Critique of Class War and Voice of the Voiceless

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Aims to Create a Society Based on Equality and Justice

The White Tiger envisages two different Indias, “an India of Light and an India of Darkness” (14) that conjures up reminiscences of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Aravind Adiga, the novelist, gives special emphasis to the India of Darkness, addressing the concern of the underdogs especially the voiceless who undergo inexplicable suffering

owing to utter discrimination between “Big Bellies and the Small Bellies” (64). This “riveting, razor-sharp debut novel explores with wit and insight the realities of these two Indias, and reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of the other.” (Bhattacharya).

The novelist attempts to highlight the malaise that has plagued the Indian society. The social framework has been formulated in such a way that the poor accept the ill treatments and traumatic experiences they suffer in the hands of the rich or elite class as a part of their social norms. In a bid to assert their superiority, the elitist mindsets, consciously or unconsciously although most of the time consciously, direct the pent up anger at the poor and the underclass, crush their spirit and choke their voice to make them voiceless, severely jeopardize their inner self, and thus in reality flirt dangerously with the rights and liberties they are entitled to.

Adiga aims to create a society based on equality and justice. Balram Halwai is the voice of the voiceless, described in the novel to be in the trap of “Rooster Coop” (173), and he makes strenuous efforts to break free from the shackles of age old traditionally sanctioned “slavery and exploitation” (Singh) at the expense of conscience even of the conscientious ordinary. This is gravely concerned to take it for granted in that social attitude of this sort may create thousands of Balrams who represent a real danger to the political and economic landscape, and can inflict serious damage on the social fabric and moral fibre of the nation.

The White Tiger

The White Tiger, the debut novel by Indian novelist, Aravind Adiga, was published in 2008 to win the 40th Man Booker Prize though fourth from Indian perspective. Considered a darkly humorous novel, it takes into account the journey of an Indian villager from rags to riches by one means or another doing justice without a second thought to Machiavellian means to achieve the ends. As an epistolary novel, it gives a thorough perspective of India’s class struggle between the haves and the have nots, retrospectively narrated in the form of letters by Balram Halwai, the protagonist to the Chinese Premier His Excellency Wen Jiabao during seven nights. In his letter to the president of China against the backdrop of his visit to Bangalore, he makes the detailed mention of his transformation and experience as a driver and a servant to become an Indian opulent class. In the wake of IT revolution and “vertiginous economic growth, the burgeoning of an aggressively consumerist, astonishingly wealthy urban elite and the rise of the bellwether stock-market index” (Bhattacharya), India is at a crossroad to deal with the deep divide between the rich and the poor.

Perfect Novel

As Michael Portillo, Chairman of the judges of Man Booker Prize said.

In many ways it was the perfect novel. The judges found the decision difficult because the shortlist contained such strong candidates. In the end, *The White Tiger* prevailed because the judges felt that it shocked and

entertained in equal measure. The novel undertakes the extraordinarily difficult task of gaining and holding the reader's sympathy for a thoroughgoing villain. The book gains from dealing with pressing social issues and significant global developments with astonishing humour. Portillo went on to explain that the novel had won overall because of its originality. He said that *The White Tiger* presented a different aspect of India and was a novel with enormous literary merit.

Examines Issues of Religion, Caste, Loyalty, Corruption and Poverty

Even as “an amazing and angry novel about injustice and power” (Donahue), *The White Tiger* rigorously examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty that has spilled over into every echelons of the society in India. As though to expose the dangerous hypocrisy of the rich, from the politicians to the police and the upper class, termed more often than not as the elite, the novel sheds light on the ruthless exploitation of the poor and the needy who in return devote all their energy to the happiness and enjoyment of their master, easily ready to treat this servitude almost in utter disgust and manoeuvre them into their whims obnoxiously, once the occasion arises.

Adiga says in an interview,

At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination. (Jeffries)

Protagonist Balram - The Voiceless Forms a Dark India

For success in his life, Balram never baulks at crime and violence, and he resorts at the drop of a hat to anger, protest, criminal acts, prostitution, drinking, chasing, grabbing all the opportunities fair or foul, no matter what serious repercussions he has to suffer. A son of a rickshaw puller and the driver of an elite class, Balram is subjected to all sorts of ill treatment and severe mental torture that makes him spirited, as if in vengeance, to voice for the underclass including marginal farmers, landless labourers, jobless youths, poor, auto and taxi drivers, servants, prostitutes, beggars and unprivileged figures. The aberration in various sectors- wrong policy, red tapist unaccountable bureaucratic set-up, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstitions, social taboos, dowry practice, economic disparity, faulty education system, poor health care system, corrupt police and judicial malfunctioning- accounts for all these problems, devoicing the downtrodden and the underprivileged forever. The widening gap between the rich and the poor is on the rise, leading to social injustice and inequality. So proliferate and ingrained are they that they are no stranger to us, rather they have become an integral part in our daily existence. Social maladies, violence, rancorous attitude and backbiting have been the order of the day. As a result, the economic framework has been such that a miniscule of society prospers and enjoys themselves at the cost of a large majority. Thus the voiceless forms a Dark India.

Kiran Desai and Adiga

Both Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* attribute the root cause of social violence to marginalization and discrimination due to yawning gap between the rich and the poor. The philosophy of Franz Fanon has profound influence on Adiga to believe that economic disparity and social inequality are the underlining reasons for frustration, depression and revolution either at social or individual level. Such widening gap amounts to unrelenting bitterness, constant class war and absence of human relationships, and the voiceless are vulnerable to a large extent.

Balram Halwai, the White Tiger

The economic inequality and consequential oppression is so acute in the society that the poor class develops an inferiority complex of servitude like Balram who tries to get rid of his slavery by doing something that may prick the conscience of a sensible person. Balram Halwai, a poor Indian villager is the **White Tiger**, a rare creature "that comes along only once in a generation"(30). It is a name given to him by a government school inspector because of his promising talent and considerable intelligence. He makes a deliberate effort to search for his identity and his existence in this world as seen in previous Indian novelists like Mulk Raj Anand's *Bakha*, and *Coolie*, and Tagore's *Gora*. As mentioned by him, his parents, almost groaning under grinding poverty, hardly bother to give him a true name and calls him 'Munna' which means 'a boy'. Shocked at his namelessness, his school teacher, Mr. Krishna dubs him as 'Balram'. Bitterly experienced with the ruthless dominance of the landlords in his village, his father, even as a rickshaw puller, sends him to school to escape their atrocities, but poverty deters him from continuing notwithstanding sheer scholastic talent; rather drives him to work in a teashop where he receives his education, albeit in an informal way, eavesdropping on customers' conversations. Here is an analytically realistic account of degraded systemic failures.

Adiga thus through the voice of protagonist says in his novel *The White Tiger* as:

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like the one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half hour before falling asleep—all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger

one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with (TWT 10-11).

Besides, the memory of his mother's death and the aftermath is horrible for all the days to come. For Balram, lavish grandeur of her funeral is starkly opposed to the abject misery, she endured while alive that the "family was guilty about something" (13). This misery is compounded by heartbreaking moments of his father's miserable death at the inadequately staffed hospital. Commenting on the lackadaisical attitude of the politicians known as "Great Socialist" for rural health care system, he ironically informs "there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections" (39), noticeably marking the striking dichotomy between the rural and the urban. His village, Laxmangarh, engulfed in poverty and social maladies, stands for "Darkness" as against "the Light" (11). All these experiences contribute to the growth of his enigmatic personality.

Caste System

The caste system as well as social hierarchy is minutely detailed by the author. There is a sharp discrepancy between the poor and the rich, the old and the new. Balram, as a new appointment in Stork family suffers sheer discrimination not just by the family but by the previous driver. The family asks him to drive standard Maruti Suzuki and treats him with reckless disregard as the second driver while the first driver is given desirable Honda City. Both of the drivers stay in appalling conditions. Balram's condition is worse in as much as he has to sleep on the floor where as the first driver occupies the bed. Though officially hired as a driver, he is instructed to do varied household menial tasks, including the most humiliating job of massaging the Stork's feet in warm water that pains him excruciatingly. As a driver, Balram has opportunity to move to New Delhi with Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky Madam and access to dungeon of rampant corruption in Indian society thus. The government sector is no exception but stands supreme in this regard. As observed, the deep and dangerous divide between the rich and the poor is not only evident at the village level but ostensibly prevailing even in the city like New Delhi. Here also, the mental trauma continues unabated. Moreover, the refusal of entry to the mall, treating him as a servile lackey, burdening him with bags and baggage, indulging him in his master's corrupt practices and lecherous activities and so on add insult to injury and put a damper on his human spirit. What is stored in him is deep angst and animalistic rage.

In one incident, Pinky the wife of Ashok kills a child in reckless drunken driving and the family makes an abominable decision to frame Balram for the hit and run case. Thus he is forced to admit the crime that he did not commit by signing this document

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

I, Balram Halwai, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement of my own will and intention:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects on the night of January 23rd this year..... That I was along in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one (TWT 167).

It was his sheer luck that no one reports the missing child. Even as mentioned by Adiga in *The White Tiger*, this is unbelievably true that

...the jails in Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul and arse. (TWT 169)

Lingering Mental Bitterness

The horrendous experience of lingering mental bitterness and ruthless treatment, unleashed by the obnoxious be all and end all mentality of the upper class is in fact agonizing. That Mongoose, brother of Mr. Ashok in his trip back to village, loses a one rupee coin while getting out of the car flirts dangerously with the essence of Balram's inner self that remains amorphous in the face of the rich. So mean and ridiculous is he that he asks Balram to search for it much to the heartrending disgust of the later who sounds distraught as if almost an identity less. Mongoose is at his most outrageous, when he points the finger of suspicion at the driver. Adiga writes:

'Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car. 'I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee.

'What do you mean, it's not there? Don't think you can steal from us just because you're in the city. I want that rupee.' 'We've just paid half a million rupees in a bribe, Mukesh, and now we're screwing this man over for a single rupee. Let's go up and have a scotch.' 'That's how you corrupt servants. It starts with one rupee. Don't bring your American ways here.'

Where that rupee coin went remains a mystery to me to this day, Mr Premier. Finally, I took a rupee coin out of my shirt pocket, dropped it on the floor of the car, picked it up, and gave it to the Mongoose. (TWT139)

A Matter for Ridicule – Rural Background and Pronunciation

This is done by a person who spends millions in bribe. Besides, Balram is made a laughing stock because of his rural background as in the pronunciation of 'mall' and 'Pizza' or simply for their entertainment and enjoyment as in the episode of dressing him like a Maharaja just for the sake of pandering to Pinky's whims and fancies. He is also warned not to switch on AC or play music when alone. All these incidents pave the way

for his criminal bent to flourish and become the breeding ground for blatant conspiracy, treacherous plot or nefarious scheme in an effort to fulfill his overriding ambitions and boost his business dealings. Thus, the utter humiliation that Balram suffers as a driver due to Mongoose, Pinky Madam, Mr Ashok and many others stimulates his animal instinct to kill Ashok, when the occasion arises.

A Gift for Irreverence and Dedication to the Cause of the Poor

Adiga's style of unflinching gift for irreverence brings out an excoriating treatment to the credos. Indian business, education, administration, religion and security come under rigorous scrutiny. The following passage is apt and illuminating.

Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. (TWT 4)

Vigorously exploring the class war in an attempt to give a voice to the underclass at a time of modernization and globalization, this novel paints a bleak picture of India, paralysed by greed, nepotism, corruption and violence at all levels. Adiga's portrayal of India stands in stark contrast to Rudyard Kipling's exoticized view and emblematic example. India in *The White Tiger* receives an unconventional and unflattering treatment. Even critics like Anjali Kapoor imputes an allegations of jaundiced eye to Adiga who presents a distorted picture of India "focusing on everything that is bad and disgusting" like Naipaul who hankers for "talking contemptuously about India, about how cleaners mop the floor in restaurants by crouching and moving like crabs and all that talk about Indians defecating in the open." (Kapoor)

Placing strong emphasis on the participation of public in the success and effectiveness of popular organization and democratic institution, Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen voice concern about "the adverse effects of social inequality on democratic practice". They underline the fact "that while the quality of democracy is often compromised by social inequality and inadequate political participation, democratic practice itself is a powerful tool of elimination of these handicaps" (Dreze). Adiga is quite right when he tries to justify that social inequality and economic disparity are the source of all evils.

Expression of Author's Anger

Asked whether it is the anger of Adiga himself, Adiga answers as follows:

The novel is written in "voice"—in Balram's voice—and not in mine. Some of the things that he's confused by or angry about are changes in India that I approve of; for instance, he is uncomfortable with (as many men like him are) the greater freedom that women have in today's India. Some of the other things he's unhappy about—like corruption—are easier for me to identify with. When talking to many men whom I met in India, I found a sense of

rage, often suppressed for years and years, that would burst out when they finally met someone they could talk to. But their anger was not the anger of a liberal, middle-class man at a corrupt system; it was something more complex—a blend of values both liberal and reactionary—and I wanted to be true to what I'd heard. Balram's anger is not an anger that the reader should participate in entirely—it can seem at times like the rage you might feel if you were in Balram's place—but at other times you should feel troubled by it, certainly.(Nick)

Consequent upon enormous economic disparity, social inequality and endemic corruption, the democracy is at risk and administrative set up is likely to deteriorate. The poor are at the receiving end. The election rigging and political opportunism, as described in the novel, is no longer a new phenomenon. It is heavily paradoxical that those, aggressively advocating for political integrity, cannot remain aloof from political quagmire, once they join politics, take responsible jobs or are at the helm. Vijay, bus conductor turned politician and the role model and inspirational figure for Balram, indulges himself with corrupt practice, dishonesty and violence. Ultimately, the underclass or the poor falls victim to these social and political anomalies through no fault of their own.

The Dark Side of the Business World

Staying with Ashok, Balram comes to know the dark side of his business world and he learns the tricks to escape. Infectiously, he himself knows the way to siphon gas, handling corrupt mechanics and refill and resell Johnnie Walker black label bottles.

As man of considerable cunning and ingenuity, Balram can easily sense the corrupt practices prevailing in the social, political and cultural system. Corruption, bribery and nepotism grow by lips and bounds. The education system which is entrusted with the responsibility of building the career of the students and shaping the future of the nation has fallen into disarray due to corruption, mismanagement and financial irregularity. Mr. Krishna embezzles the government allocated fund meant for the purpose of uniforms and lunch of the students. The bribery by Mr. Ashok to get coal mine is seen and experienced by Balram. Quid pro quos are essence of the politicians or the person of political affiliations. Corruption and scandals hit the headlines in India every day. It is so rampant and wide spread that “there are few to whom India's corruption will come as a surprise.” (Segal)

In the programme “You ask the question,” Adiga, in response to a query on poor condition, internal unrest and terrorism in India, said:

These problems have been brewing for a long time. The causes are complex, but one common theme I find is the heightened tension within the country that's caused by the growing gap between the rich and the poor. The flare-ups can often take the form of ethnic or regional protests, but the underlying grievances are often economic: "those people who live over there are doing

much better than we are." Fixing the economic disparities has to be part of any attempt to address India's growing unrest. The country's intelligence and police agencies need to be reformed and modernised; right now they seem way behind the terrorists. (Adiga)

The Dominant Class Conscious Mentality

According to Balram, the dominant class conscious mentality has a prime role to plan and construct for the poor a "Rooster Coop" which is described as:

Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they are next, yet they cannot rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with humans in this country. (TWT173-174)

He also lays the blame on the mentality of the servant class who suffers "perpetual servitude" without making any effort to wriggle out of this situation. As mentioned:

"one can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse". (TWT 147)

Mirza Ghalib's line 'They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in the world' (40), provides Balram with food for thought, dose of inspiration and the desire to be a free bird. Besides, his visit to his native village whets his appetite for freedom.

...It was a very important trip for me... while Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam were relaxing...I swam through the pond, walked up the hill...and entered the Black Fort for the first time...Putting my foot on the wall, I looked down on the village from there. My little Laxmangarh. I saw the temple tower, the market, the glistening line of sewage, the landlords' mansion – and my own house, with that dark little cloud outside – the water buffalo. It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth. I leaned out from the edge of the fort in the direction of my village – and then I did something too disgusting to describe to you. Well actually, I *spat*. Again and again. And then, whistling and humming, I went back down the hill. Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat (TWT.41-42).

To Break Out of the Rooster Coop

Unstinting individual effort with ferocious determination, exemplified by him, is the need of the hour to break out of the "Rooster Coop". Thus he thinks he can manage to do away with India's "Rooster Coop" by killing and robbing Mr. Ashok. Balram is acutely aware of the fact that the brutal murder of Mr. Ashok will put in serious jeopardy

his family who has to face the fiery wrath of the Storks or fall prey to their bloody vengeance. Nonetheless, he never allows his emotions to come in the way of the relentless pursuit of “his own uncaring ambition” (Singer) and irresistible desire. He considers himself “a self-taught entrepreneur” (4), represents, as he himself mentions, “tomorrow” (319) and stands for the voice of the voiceless.

Some treats Balram as a typical psychopath or sociopath who according to Copley “selects a course of action based on only one factor—what can he get out of it. This cold-blooded mode of reasoning enables the psychopath to commit acts that most people’s consciences would not allow”. But Balram is not a psychopath rather he is someone deeply frustrated by the social system. He develops a sense of social exclusion being under the combined spell of disillusion of the social institutions and ill treatment and misbehaviour of Mr..Ashok and his social circles. To do illegal things to achieve his self centered aims does not seem uncommon to him in such an environment.

As a driver of Mr. Ashok, he gives a one rupee coin to a little street beggar even against the reproachable gesture of one of his masters. This shows Balram is a man of both considerate mentality and devil may care attitude. Pinky Madam, with the departure of Mongoose, wears those clothes that are revealing in the extreme. Balram feels attracted and fiercely turned on, nevertheless he manages to get to grips with the emotions, and excitement cannot hold sway over his sensibility. This shows he is not a person of whims and fancies but a man of sense and reason, as time demands. Besides, he nurtures a fellow feeling for the drivers in his taxi business that psychopath cannot. Even as he successfully handles the crisis in the wake of a boy’s death using his ingeniously designed tricks and bribing police to take control of the situation, if flared up, he pays a visit to the victim’s family, apologizes for the incident, offers some consolable amount and assures a job in his business for one of the survival member. He knows Mr Ashok is not as bad as others but it is Hobson’s choice on his part to kill him to execute his plan in Bangalore, for which he feels regret sometimes.

Moreover, as stated, Balram, as a rickshaw puller’s son is raised in a typical poor family in India. He is thus from a family where men and women sleep in opposite corners of the house. With his harrowing experience against the backdrop of a large family, impoverished background in his village and painful humiliation as a driver in the hands of the upper class, it is natural for him to be desperate for a change. In this sense, he has to transform into a new version of Nietzsche’s “ubermensch,” or over-man, who believes himself to be above the moral and legal limitations of society. For the poor, in order to build a home of their dreams and touch the glory of their imagination, they have to flirt with danger or dice with death, altogether oblivious of conscience, morality, rules and regulations. Balram makes no exception. It is a Herculean task for him to translate his dreams into deed, and he manages it by hook or crook. Be that as it may, Adiga says:

At points it does get like that. But this is the servant’s perspective. It is his subjective views, which are pretty depressing. There are also two crimes that he commits: he robs, and he kills, and by no means do I expect a reader to

sympathize with both the crimes. He's not meant to be a figure whose views you should accept entirely. There's evidence within the novel that the system is more flexible than Balram suggests, and it is breaking down faster than he claims. And within the story I hope that there's evidence of servants cheating the masters systematically...to suggest a person's capacity for evil or vice is to grant them respect—is to acknowledge their capacity for volition and freedom of choice. (Sawhney)

Thus, accused of being “contaminated financially and sexually”(The Times) and a “morally bankrupt man” (Saxena), Balram's views of realizing his ambitions and “violent bid for freedom” (Turpin) at any cost create a furore in the educated mass. Doggedly pursuing ambitions is good but when it is divested of social, moral and legal sanctity, it is like cultivating flowers in the garden full of weeds and thorns. If left untreated or mistreated, it will wreak havoc. Nonetheless, “Mr Adiga has produced a hero almost as memorable as Pip, proving himself the Charles Dickens of the call-centre generation.” (*The Economist*)

To Conclude

As a civilized nation, India cannot turn a blind eye to the plight of the poor and the underprivileged. It is absolutely imperative to close the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, address their concern and infuse them into the social mainstream, or else many a Balram and Mr. Ashok will surface to make a dent in the political establishment, tamper with the social fabric, deal a severe blow to the moral fibre and prove downright dangerous for the financial health of the nation. Indeed, *The White Tiger* can trigger an ideological change that will bring to an end the derogatory concept of ‘class war’ and ‘the voiceless’.

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