

Social Mobility and Crime in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Globalization, in its wake, has also brought in a lot of disparity in terms of economy and life style. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* presents to the world the story of two Indias – the India of Light and the India of Darkness. This article endeavors to analyze the text through the lens of “crime theories” of Marton (1983), Agnew (2001), McCarthy (1998), etc. Balaram Halwai, the central protagonist of the novel, murders his boss and gains occupational success. This successful attempt has endowed his life with various gifts – an illumination from darkness and poverty, a good life, a successful career and above all freedom from the bondage of slavery. This heinous crime has transformed his life from a chauffeur to a successful entrepreneur. This paper aims to discuss how crime becomes an agency of getting rid of poverty and attaining personal advancement in a manner socially unacceptable.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, Crime, poverty, mobility, occupational success

Published in 2008 when India was suffering from financial crisis, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* portrays the sordid reality of India – a clear picture of dark India where the poor lead a sordid life under fly overs, struggle to earn bread and butter, receive inhuman treatment from the rich, caste disparities reign supreme and above all filthy politics can triumph over everything. This epistolary novel portrays the journey of a chauffeur from a poverty stricken life to a successful entrepreneur. His journey also exhibits how an “honest” person can become a criminal for lack of resources in any developing nation and how the ability of smart thinking can lead one to success. This paper endeavors to discuss how crime has become a vehicle of social mobility, removed the darkness of poverty and ushered a person to success which Sorokin (1957) has defined as vertical mobility.

With the advent of globalization, the numbers of poor are increasing day by day and unemployment is weakening the backbone of India. According to World Bank Report, one among the five is poor in India. Approximate 31 million unemployed are seeking job and unemployment rate is ushering day by day (CMIE report, 2018). This unemployment is leading them towards frustration and the common mass is harbouring suicidal tendency as they are incapable of getting any job or source of income.

Crime can be described as an illegal act for which someone may be punished by the Government (Merriam-Webster). Blackstone (1765) defines “crime as the violation of public rights and duties”. Garofalo (1914) describes crime “Crime is an immoral and harmful act that is regarded as criminal by public opinion, because it is an injury to so much of the moral sense as is possessed by a community – a measure which is indispensable for the adaptation of the individual society”. (59) Gillan (1945) refers to it as “an act that has been shown to be actually harmful to society, or that is believed to be socially harmful by a group of people that has the power to enforce its beliefs, and that places such act under the ban of positive penalties”. (9)

Theories of crime can be classified into three categories – biological, psychological and sociological. Biological explanations of crime assume that some people are born criminal and they have an underdeveloped brain functions which engages them in crime. The other name of this theory is biological positivism (Lombroso, 1876). Psychological theories of crime attempts to describe how mental processes impact individual propensities for violence and how delinquent behavior is caused by imbalances among id, ego and superego. Aichorn’s (in Torch, 1979) early works describe how childhood neglects, abuses or damaged egos render an individual incapable of dealing with stressful circumstances which in later stage lead them to crime. The social theories of crime describe how crime is a product of conflicts over the distribution of resources among common people. This maldistribution gradually makes a negative impact on poor, which bring or create conflict (Turner 1975). Crime or a social misdemeanor offers the poor another hope for survival as they explore that the possibility of success through limited legitimate efforts (Marton, 1938).

From the lens of above theoretical framework, one can critically analyse the text of *The White Tiger* in general and the character of Balaram, in particular. Born and brought up amidst abject poverty of Laxmangarh, Balaram is one of the representatives of those destitute people who live in darkness – darkness brought by the black river – the holy river Ganga:

I am talking of a place in India, a least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields ... Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. (Adiga, 2009, p. 14)

Balarama goes on to describe the place and then the people. His description, in sarcastic tones, throws light on the actual condition in the rural parts of the country.

Electricity poles – defunct.

Water tap – broken

Children – too lean and short for their age, and with their oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India. (Adiga, 2009, p. 20)

Compared to these children are the landlords of Laxmangarh - the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven- named on the peculiarities of appetite they have. They live in mansions and their children study in another town.

It is from here that this school dropout works at a tea stall, smashes coal, wipes tables and then lands up in Dhanbad where he trains as a driver. Unemployment is another factor which induces criminal behavior in a person (Agnew, 2001). Raphael and Winter-Ebmer (2001) opine that legitimate employment opportunities deter a person from committing crime. But when legitimate opportunities of employment are limited in our society and unemployment is increasing, it inflates the rate of crime. Balaram is the representative of the youths in modern India who are struggling with poverty and unemployment which is leading them towards frustration as well as utter depression. While Bangalore or the land of Light has job advertisements running into twenty, twenty-five pages in newspapers every week, the story in the Darkness is different:

There, every morning, tens of thousands of young men sit in the tea shops, reading the newspaper, or lie on the charpoy humming a tune, or sit in their rooms talking to a photo of a film actress. They have no job to do today. They know they won't get any job today. They've given up the fight.

They're the smart ones.

The stupid ones have gathered in a field in the centre of the town. Every now and then a truck comes by, and all the men in the field rush to it with their hands outstretched, shouting, 'Take me! Take me!' (Adiga, 2009, 54-55)

From this scenario, Balaram lands up learning to drive a car as well as repairing one. Chance brings him to the gates of the house of the Stork, one of the landlords of Laxmangarh

and he manages to get employment as a driver to Mr. Ashok. When he was searching for a job in Dhanbad, he was refused cold heartedly by everyone:

So I went looking, from house to house, house to house, house to house. Finally, after two weeks of asking and being told to get lost, I got to a house ten-foot- high walls, and a cage of iron grills around each window. (Adiga, 2009, p. 59)

With the employment for the first time, he has been endowed a cage where he receives little freedom to live. This job has definitely provided him a source of income, but a source of income with servitude and humiliation. To Balaram, it is a better opportunity as other sources of legitimate income are blocked to him. Hence, he had accepted a job which humiliates his dignity as it is the only vehicle to sustain his life blood, to earn his bread.

The treatment to these poor is so brutal that they hardly know the significance of good behavior. They gradually cherish in them a sense of anger which in later stages leads them to criminal behavior (Agnew, 2001). Balaram recounts an episode of treatment meted out to a servant whom the master, the Buffalo, believed to have been involved in the kidnapping of his son. The punishment does not stop with the employed servant but extends to his family:

One brother was set upon while working in the fields; beaten to death there. That brother's wife was finished off by three men working together. A sister, still unmarried, was also finished off. Then the house where the family had lived was surrounded by the four henchmen and set on fire. (Adiga, 2009, p. 67)

Being tormented by poverty and misbehavior from his employers, Balaram cherished anger in his mind which disrupted his cognitive process. While he was killing Ashok, he hardly feels any sympathy for him, rather he cuts his throat like - "Muslims kill their chickens" (286). The murder was so gruesome that he hardly thought twice before piercing his neck.

Agnew (2001) says that there is a strong link between unjust treatment and anger. Anger often leads to crime. Balaram is always received with unjust treatment by his master class. He has never been accepted with dignity; rather they have treated him like a beast who can easily be made a scapegoat in times of need. His duty is not limited to driving cars. Sweeping the courtyard, making tea, removing cobweb, playing with a child and massaging the Stork's feet were all a part of his duty. When Pinky Madam smashed a child under her car, the master class has used him as a vehicle to save Pinkey madam from conviction; above all they wanted to save their dignity and status. They even made him to sign a petition to keep a legal proof of it:

I, Balaram Halwai, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement...I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons,...I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened. (Adiga, 2009, p. 167)

Balaram is not only the person who has received unjust treatment from his masters, but he is the representative of those drivers who are constantly being victimized by their masters and lead their lives behind the bars because they have taken the blame of their masters. When Pinkey madam left India, Balaram was abused and assaulted physically by Ashok though Balaram always looked at him with respect. Ashok was almost going to kill Balaram until Balaram kicked in the chest of his master to release him from his grasp. This becomes the daily phenomenon in the lives of the servants in India, who come from the lower section of society to earn bread. But they earn it with humiliation though they serve their master class with loyalty. The educated masterclass often mocks them, humiliates them and beats them without any reason as they always think that they often deserve it or expect it from their masters. They are even paralleled with dogs which are given more dignity than servants. It seems this unjust treatment triggers anger in Balaram and smashes the humane feeling in him. It becomes one of the factors for committing the crime. After committing the crime, he did not even feel guilty for his criminal behaviour, rather he justifies his act: "I will never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I silt my master's throat." (320). This phenomenon supports the idea of Agnew (2001) that an angry individual is less likely to feel guilt for their criminal behaviour because the injustices they suffered justifies crime. Balaram has suffered the injustice from his masters. Therefore, he made an attempt to justify his crime.

Balaram used crime as vehicle to achieve his monetary success. Appadurai (2001) rightly says that poor are not immune to greed, conflict and jealousy. They are always prepared to cheat or lie if they find out a new opportunity for their advancement. Hence, Balaram have chosen a career at the expense of life of Ashok. He has murdered and plundered Ashok like a beast or a professional murderer without any hesitation: I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains. It's a good strong bottle, Johnnie Walker Black – well worth its resale value. (Adiga, 2009, p. 284)

This heinous work has ascended him to the pick of success. He fled to Bangalore to start up a new company, a new entrepreneurship which brought him name and fame – "Once I was a driver to a master, but now I am a master of Drivers" (302). Once, he has struggled in dire poverty for getting employment where he got little hope for personal advancement. Hence, crime becomes an irresistible temptation to him to achieve monetary success. Tunley (2011) says that

opportunities frequently act as a catalyst to commit a crime. Balamram has received an opportunity to shape his career and to achieve his success which he has used wisely. The amount of money “seven hundred thousand rupees” (280) in the red bag can shape his destiny. Therefore, he hatched the plot to kill Ashok. Balamram was living in a society where the rate of success through legitimate opportunities were little and above all he has observed from his surrounding that people get access to success when they engage them in cheating, stealing or bribing. Hence, he not only has cheated his master, but also murdered him to fulfill his ambition. He has achieved his social status through criminal behavior. Merton (1983) also argues that when the rate of success among the poor through legitimate effort is limited, they use illegitimate means to achieve success which is gradually increasing vice and crime in our society. On the other hand, he has taken this decision out of rational calculation because he has observed that reward of success is higher than the consequences of conviction and he has nothing to lose by being convict.

Agnew (2001) pointed out that certain factors like – erratic parental discipline, parental rejection and low emotional attachment with family members which often leads a person towards crime. The children who are residing in the slum area have little emotional connection with their parents. The adults in a slum area beget children like pigs, leave them in the dirty world to grow up by themselves - “They have eight, nine, ten children – sometimes they don’t know the names of their own children” (164). They grow up with utter poverty and frustration. They fight with each other to snatch resources from each other. They have never been taken care of properly by their family members. Balamram is one among those who receives little love and affection from his family members. His mother died when he was too young; his father was a rickshaw puller who stays out of home most of the times in order to earn bread. His family members forgot to christen him, his school teacher has christened him the name and government has given his date of birth. He was not properly given proper food by Kusum; rather they have used him as an instrument who can give a certain amount of income to his family. He never receives care from his family, rather he got maltreatment from his family members who complained against Balamram in front of his father. After getting job, when he visited his village for the first time, he was treated with care for the first time in his life – “I got more attention than the water buffalo” (Adiga, 2009, p. 83). He was received with care because he has been providing them money. Hence, his worth is judged by the money which he is providing to his family. The common masses who are living in poverty only beget their child to use them as the vehicle to earn money. Therefore, parental love and affection remains a myth to them. This lack of love and affection gradually leads them to commit criminal behaviour. They gradually start killing humane feelings and emotions in them. When they grow up into adult, they start behaving indifferently with their parents or family members. Balamram also repeated the same. He becomes so irresponsive towards his family members that he stopped helping them even in their need. After committing the crime, though he has assumed the consequences of it on his family members, he never

bothered about it; rather he has willingly allowed them to suffer the consequences. As he has affection with his family members, it does not become a deterrent to his advancement.

McCarthy (1998) also states that lack of shelter, adequate food and economic crisis ignite the criminal behavior in a person. Tittle (1983) also opines that there is a significant relationship between poverty and criminal behavior. People from lower strata of the society tend to commit crime more than the rich as they are living in a resource crisis area. The deprivation of the resources directly leads them to criminal behavior as the lack of basic resources has killed their humane feelings and made them a brute. The lower class people struggle in dire poverty, hopelessness and frustration. Their condition is so pathetic that they are not provided with basic facilities of sanitation, drinking water and hospital. They did not have access to proper education which is gradually making them immoral. The poor in the villages die in utter carelessness because of inadequate medical facilities. The doctors remain constantly absent from the hospital and the poor spitting up blood against the walls in hospitals. The ward boys in the hospitals are more concerned with goats rather than humans:

A goat came in and sniffed as we were mopping the blood off the floor. The ward boys petted her and fed her a palm carrot as we mopped our father's infected blood off the floor. (Adiga, 2009, p. 50-51)

Local villagers died without being treated whereas stuffs of the hospital remain indifferent to their plights. Gradually, the poor become the silent victim of the system.

The living conditions of the poor are pathetic in villages. They live like rooster coops in a small room where they slept together at night where ones' leg usually falls over other. Even, they fu*ked their wives when their parents and children are sleeping beside them. They did not have sense of privacy. Appadurai (2001) rightly says that the lives of the poor are marked by complete lack of privacy. Though they are suffering extremely from the deprivation of resources, they hardly seek emancipation from this degrading environment; rather they preferred to quarrel with each other. Adiga has mockingly compared their life with "rooster coop" which are stuffed tightly in the cages, shit on each other and jostle for the berating space. They hardly wanted to get rid from the environment.

The situation is no better with the people who are living in urban poverty. Their conditions are also worse than animal. They live under bridges, flyovers or in tents which are made of bamboos, sacks or tarpaulin sheets. They are defecting in an open place near the slum where they are taking the smell of their own shit. The poor servants like Balaram who are residing in dormitory in Delhi are living like a beast in the cage. They are living in an unhygienic

environment where they spent most of their nights with cockroaches and lizards. The cockroaches hover throughout the wall at night and make annoying noises:

It was a horrible, this room. The floor had not been finished, and there was a cheap whitish plaster on the walls in which you could see the marks of the hand that had applied the plaster...the wall was covered with cockroaches, which had come to feed on the minerals or the limestone in the plaster; their chewing made a continuous noise, and their antennae trembled from every spot on the wall. Some of the cockroaches landed on the top of the net; from inside, I could see their dark bodies against its white waves. (Adiga, 2009, p. 131)

When they woke up in the morning, they had to wait a long for the common toilet as they are limited in number. Appadurai (2001) in his “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics” has cited the same problem. He says:

At the few existing public toilets, the lines are often so long that they involve waiting times of an hour or more; and of course, medical facilities for stemming the condition are also hard to find. In short, defecating and its management are a central issue of slum life. Living in an ecology of faecal odours, piles and channels, where cooking water, washing water, and faeces-laden water are not carefully segregated, adds material risks to health to the symbolic risks incurred by defecating in public view. (37)

It is not only the masses from the slum who defecate in the public view but also the poor from the villages (including women) defecate in the public places - beside the street, rail line or behind the bushes because there are few available toilets nearby their habitants.

Balaram is the representative of those poverty-stricken people who are living in the inhuman circumstances. The world they are living is no better than hell. Hence, he wanted to get emancipation from these degrading circumstances. He found crime as the only option that can help him to gain economic success or vertical mobility as the legitimate options can hardly provide him a good life. Balaram immediately hatched the plan of murdering Ashok to achieve his economic goal or success. He murdered Ashok like a professional killer and fled away with his money to Bangalore to start his entrepreneurship.

Being born and brought up in extreme poverty, Balaram struggled a lot to achieve the economic success. When he has found that his success through legitimate means is impossible, he has adopted illegitimate means to achieve his success. He has used crime as a vehicle for his vertical mobility and ascended him to the pick of success. His journey from a chauffeur to entrepreneur is the greatest example of vertical mobility which has endowed him with power success and experience.

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