

Ashok (Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*) Weak-willed

Character Ashok is the son of a rich and corrupt businessman and the boss of Balram, the son of a poor man, who becomes his driver. Ashok's character, we are let to believe, has been shaped by his early years in America. He is completely devoted to profit-making, like all his family, but he has a softer, more human side. At times he is capable of treating Balram like a human being (instead of as a non-person, a functionary, a servant). He also sees that what he and his family are doing is both illegal and immoral, but he lacks the will power to change. As the novel develops, we realise that Ashok becomes more and more dependent on Balram (a strong-willed character), to the extent that he begins to trust him. In one scene, Ashok confesses to Balram that he is tired of living his 'soul-less' life and that he wishes to return to the simplicity of rural life. Balram perceives this as a weakness that he can exploit: as a 'white tiger,' Balram is a predator in the jungle that is India. Ashok's wife, Madame Pinky, is also a stronger character than he. When she leaves him, he goes into a downward spiral, that culminates in his murder by Balram.

Activities Ashok spends most of his days being driven around by Balram. He goes to the houses of rich friends, to offices in the newly-built exclusive Delhi suburb of Gurgaon and to expensive shops, where Ashok's wife, Madame Pinky, spends money. Most of his time, however, is spent paying bribes to government officials in order that they turn a blind eye to his family's illegal business and to reduce their tax bill. On these drives, Ashok carries a large, red leather, Italian bag, stuffed with rupees, which he ferries into one government office after another. It's exhausting, and he later relaxes by going to prostitutes.

Illustrative moments

Pitiable When his wife leaves him and return to America, Ashok becomes lost and confused. He rages at Balram, but later apologises and then appears incapable of taking care of himself. Balram looks after him like a wife or mother, cooking his meals and making sure he doesn't drink himself to death.

Kind Although corrupt, Ashok is capable of moments of kindness. One such occurs when he defends Balram against accusations that he is bad driver. When Balram is driving Ashok's brother in a new suburb of Delhi, Balram gets lost and is berated by the brother. Ashok speaks up for Balram, pointing that he is very good at finding prostitutes.

Aware One evening, having finished their exhausting round of visiting government offices in order to pay bribes, Ashok and his brother are returning home. En route, they pass a billboard showing Gandhi, the icon of humility and self-sacrifice. Looking at it, and thinking of what he's just done, Ashok has enough awareness of the hypocrisy to cry, 'It's a fucking joke.'

Ruthless Despite the moments of kindness, Ashok is essentially a corrupt and ruthless man. When he first hires Balram he interviews him and gathers extensive information regarding his family. He does this not in order to judge his character but in order to know whom to kill in revenge if Balram crosses him.

Discussion question

All the characters in this sometimes brutal novel are presented as products of their social and economic background. There are, however, glimpses of human kindness and innate generosity. Behaviour, whether moral or immoral, is the result of the fluctuating struggle between these two forces. Explore this idea with reference to the character of Ashok.