

The White Tiger (2008)

Overview *The White Tiger*, the first novel by Aravind Adiga (b. 1974), won the Man Booker Prize in 2008. It is certainly a tour de force, written entirely in the first-person as a series of letters, over eight nights, to the Chinese Premier. It is thus an epistolary novel, but one that allows the protagonist Balram to tell his 'yellow brother' about the realities of Indian society and politics. 'Whatever you may have read or heard about India, my dear premier,' Balram writes, 'is pure bullshit.' The title of the novel is the nickname given to Balram by a school Inspector, who admires his intelligence and, even more, his cunning. Other characters are similarly named after predators. In the style of *Animal Farm*, the novel is a savage yet comic dissection of the social and political rot in modern India.

Story When the story begins, Balram has become a wealthy 'entrepreneur', running a series of companies in Bangalore, the Silicon of India. He writes a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, who is about to visit the city, in order to advise him about what to expect and how to negotiate business deals with the country. Over the course of these letters, Balram tells his own story, which begins when he takes over his father's tea-stall. Little by little, Balram advances. He becomes a driver to Ashok, the son of a corrupt rich man, from whom he learns how to bribe, deceive and steal. He follows his boss and Madame Pinky, his America-obsessed wife, to Delhi, where he drives him around the city so that he can pay bribes to various officials as a payoff for ignoring his and his father's illegal business dealings. Balram takes his ill father to hospital, where he dies because there is a shortage of staff. He narrates several other episodes that illustrate the corruption in India. One night, a drunk Pinky insists on driving and kills a young child. Balram takes the wheel and the responsibility for the death. A trial never happens because Ashok bribes a judge, and Balram comments that this is only to be expected. Pinky leaves Ashok, bringing Ashok and Balram closer together, as co-dependents in crime. One night, Balram murders Ashok and steals the money he was carrying around to use as bribes. Balram justifies this by saying that the money belonged to him and to the common people of India. Balram flees Delhi and goes to Bangalore, where he learns that the key industry is call-centres and out-sourcing from the West. He sets up 'White Tiger taxis' to ferry the call-centre workers to and from their offices. He renames himself 'Ashok', explaining that everything he knows he learned from his 'master.' When one of Balram's drivers hits and kills a young man, Balram feels responsible and takes a lot of blood-money to the dead man's family and asks for their forgiveness. Meanwhile, he learns that his entire family back home have been killed, by Ashok's family as revenge for his murder.

Characters

Balram Balram, the protagonist and 'white tiger', is a poor man who makes it big through his intelligence and ruthless ambition. His view of the world, that one must fight, cheat and even kill to advance, has been shaped by his degraded status as poor and low caste.

Ashok Ashok is the son of a rich man for whom Balram becomes a driver. Ashok is vain, shallow and without moral principles, which makes him, in a strange way, a mirror-image of Balram. As a weak character in the Indian 'jungle', he is killed by Balram.

Madame Pinky Madame Pinky is Ashok's wife, who is even more shallow than he is. She represents the globalised consumer culture that has (in the author's view) ruined Indian society. She is obsessed with America, where she eventually ends up, having left her husband.

Kusum Kusum is Balram's maternal grandmother. The matriarch of the family, and possibly the only character with any morality in the novel, she tries to keep Balram from being excessively cruel. She also demands that she send her money each money.

'Vitiligo-Lips' 'Vitiligo-Lips' is so-called because of a disease, common to poor people in India, that causes his lips to have a light skin pigment. He befriends Balram in Delhi and guides around the city, introducing him to prostitutes and a magazine called 'Murder Weekly.' As Balram's friend, he is one of the few characters who shows any empathy toward anyone.

'The Great Socialist' 'The Great Socialist', like several other characters, is a deliberate stereotype, known only by his generic title. He is a parody of India's politicians, who profess socialism (the legacy of Nehru) but practice naked and corrupt capitalism.

Themes

Corruption The dominant theme of this satirical novel is the corruption, degradation and criminality at the core of Indian society and politics. One is hard-pressed to identify a single act of kindness or generosity in its 300+ pages.

Poverty At the same time, the author provides an explanation for this sorry state of affairs by showing how poverty and humiliation breed anger and violence. Balram's childhood and early years are filled with examples of him being forced to show deference, to act as a servile and to 'give way' to others richer and higher in status.

Morality The author suggests that Balram's life, including murdering his boss, is a rational and intelligent response to the life he is forced to lead. Balram says he is the only one, like the Buddha, who has awakened and is conscious of the realities around him. Morality, in other words, is flexible and dependent on social context.

Globalisation While indicting Indian society, the novel also takes aim at the evils of a globalised economy, especially the call-centre and out-sourcing that allow western countries to exploit labour in low-wage countries, such as India.

Identity The novel also raises questions about the fixity and fluidity of identity. Balram goes from rags to riches, but he still retains a loyalty to his family. He is nicknamed the 'white tiger' because he is rare and fierce. He also assumes the name of Ashok (the man he hated and murdered), which demonstrates how opposites are closer than we think.