

THE WHITE TIGER

Aravind Adiga

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.

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.

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 month.

'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.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

BALRAM (Ambitious)

Character

As the first-person narrator of the story, Balram is not only the central character. He is the overwhelmingly dominant character, whose cynical, comic and honest voice is heard from the first to the last page. Balram is a wounded man, hurt by the degradation of poverty and, even more, by the humiliation of having to show deference to others who are higher caste, richer or otherwise superior in status. He is also very intelligent, largely because he absorbs information from others. 'I am not an original thinker,' he explains to the reader. 'I am an original listener.' He is given the nickname the 'white tiger' by a school inspector who says that he is rarest and most cunning animal in the 'jungle' that is India.

Born the son of a rickshaw driver, Balram gradually moves up the social and economic scale, first running a tea-shop, then becoming a driver and finally a wealthy businessman, or 'entrepreneur', as he likes to call himself. By a minor stroke of luck, he is hired as a driver for the son of the landlord who is exploiting his family. Working for the landlord's son, Balram observes the bribes he pays to government officials so that they will turn a blind eye to Ashok's family's illegal business affairs and tax avoidance. Later he kills the son, steals his money and sets himself up in business, providing a taxi service that ferries call-centre workers to and from their offices. In the end, he explains to the reader that he has no regrets about his life. Even though he killed a man, he had to in order to escape a life of poverty and servitude.

Activities

Driving a car, cheating people (for example, using false receipts for car repairs to get extra money from his boss). Imitating the corrupt and soul-less life style of the entrepreneurs upon whom he models himself: drinking, gambling, whoring.

Illustrative moments

Ambitious After overhearing someone say that drivers earn a high salary from rich men, Balram, who at that point is running a tea-stall, commits himself to becoming a driver. He has no experience, no contacts, no idea of how to proceed, but he is single-minded in his pursuit of his goal. He instantly leaves his family-business of the tea-stall, finds money for driving lessons and tells lies in order to be hired as the chauffeur for a rich man's son.

Amoral Balram has no moral compass, only a burning desire to get rich and escape the personal degradation of being a servant. In many ways he is indebted to his boss, Ashok, the man whose car he drives. From Ashok, Balram learns the dirty tricks of being an entrepreneur, how to cheat, lie and steal. One day, he cuts Ashok's throat with a broken bottle and steals his money. Why did I kill him? Balram asks himself. Because, he says, he wanted to escape the humiliation of being a servant, of having to bow down to others.

Honest Toward the end of the novel, when Balram is a rich man, himself driven by a chauffeur, his car accidentally kills a young man on the street. No charge is made against him because he has bribed half the police force, but later Balram takes a large sum of money to the house of the dead man. When the parents of the dead man express confusion, Balram explains that he is responsible for the accident (because he told the driver to go as fast as possible) and that the police let him off because that 'is the way of the jungle we live in.' He forces the parents to accept the money and asks for their forgiveness. At the same time, he fears that his colleagues will sense that he is weak and will take advantage of him.

Analytical Balram makes many shrewd observation about Indian society and political system. He understands the hypocrisy of a country that sees itself as the legacy of Gandhi. 'It's a fucking joke,' Balram says when he drives past a billboard with an image of the ascetic Gandhi.

ASHOK (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 returns 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 a 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.

PINKY MADAME (Determined)

Character Despite the frivolity of her name, Pinky Madame ('madame' is appended to a woman's name as a term of respect) is no 'dumb blonde.' In fact, she is a very strong, determined woman who almost always gets her way. She spent many years in the US, where, apparently, she learned the virtues of 'retail therapy.' Moving back to India, she intends to carry on her high-maintenance lifestyle. Because she is independently rich, she is able to act independently from her weak husband and eventually leaves him and returns to America. Before that, though, when her husband moves them to Delhi, she demands that they settle in the new, luxurious, hi-tech suburb of Gurgaon.

Activities Pinky Madame spends hours driving to and from shopping malls, which have appeared all over Delhi. Sitting in the back seat with her husband, she mixes English and Hindi, commenting on life in India and America. She is very good-looking, Balram observes, but rarely goes to the hairdresser or gym. She keeps to herself, shunning the company of others. Balram observes that she 'never joined in our conversation. Except to play badminton, which she did wearing dark glasses, she never left her room.'

Illustrative moments

Impetuous On Pinky Madame's birthday, she orders her husband to provide a special dinner, to be served by Balram dressed as a maharaja. After a lot of drinking, she insists on driving them all back home to their apartment. On the way, she runs over and kills a young child. Her impetuosity has resulted in an avoidable death.

Influential In the aftermath of this car accident, she insists that Balram take the blame, which he (as a servant) does. While he fears that he will be imprisoned, Pinky Madame informs him that through her contacts in the police force, he is free.

Self-sufficient Perhaps because of her independent income, she is a self-sufficient person. Once, while sitting in the car with her husband, she challenged him on something and he told her to keep her voice down because 'there's a driver in the car.' She replied, 'We don't need a driver. I can drive. Just like in America.'

Discussion questions

Does Pinky Madame represent a positive or negative image of a woman?

Her obsession with America appears to symbolise modern India's turn toward globalisation, US-style neo-liberal economic policies and an entrepreneurial business culture. Do you regard this symbolism as effective? Heavy-handed? Clever? Trite?