

Settings and their importance: the white tiger and native son



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When writing *The White Tiger* and *Native Son*, Aravind Adiga and Richard Wright utilized setting to influence the plot of the novels, by having the stories of their characters happen in very regulated and controlling societies. Their extreme conditions push the protagonists to want to break out of the cycle they're in and the only way to achieve that, in their opinion, is by doing negative actions and extreme crime. While Balram Halwai is successfully escaping the "Rooster Coop" of Indian society, Bigger Thomas is struggling through the racist community of Chicago during the 1930s.

The White Tiger shapes a visual representation of corruption in Indian society. Electoral fraud is a common practice in India; it is expected of the rich landowners or business owners to give the Great Socialist either money or fingerprints of the people who work for them. The impecunious population doesn't have a fair say in what goes on in the nation, even though the country is considered democratic. The people are coerced into following the instructions of their bosses: "There was an election coming up, and the tea shop owner had already sold us. He had sold our fingerprints – the inky fingerprints which the illiterate person makes on the ballot paper to indicate his vote. . . he had got a good price for each one of us from the Great Socialist's party" (Adiga 81).

Because most of the poor population are illiterate, due to the fact that they are either taken out of school early or simply do not have any money to pay for a school, it is easier for the educated people in power to overrule and manipulate those in social classes below them. The government takes advantage of such poor educational situations in the country by giving money to the business owners to regulate the elections, because the

business owners only care about receiving money to sustain their families. Such actions performed by the government lead to the cycle of corruption and poverty becoming unbreakable because no change can be made when the same people hold the position of power.

Adiga creates a strong contrast between the wealthy people of India and the poor people who live in the so called “ Rooster Coop” and work for the rich their whole life: India’s caste system. While the rich swim in their plethora of wealth with luxury residences, huge shopping malls and personal drivers; the working class suffer from extreme poverty where the only thing they can rely on is their water buffalo and giving birth to a lot of children in order for them to work and bring some cash to the family for food: “ At the doorway to my house, you’ll see the most important member of my family. The water buffalo. . . She was the dictator of our house!” (Adiga 17). Balram’s family not only cherishes the buffalo because it is the Holy symbol of India, but also because it is their main resource of money. The more milk the buffalo produces, the more money the family receives. With that comes a high risk of losing everything they rely on, which could very well lead to death from starvation.

Location plays an important role in the Balram’s character development and mind set. As Balram is taken out of school, he is forced to work in the Tea Shop in order to obtain additional income for the family. He observes the lives of other people in poverty and realizes that if he doesn’t change something, then he will follow his family’s footsteps and stay in this poverty for the rest of his life. Balram is certain that when he leaves the Darkness to travel away and work in the Light he will escape the poverty and have a

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better life for himself and for his family. But when he gets to New Delhi, his dreams do not exceed his reality. What he is witnessing is the opposite of what he imagined: “ These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh” (Adiga 222). For Balram, it always seemed that big cities bring people success and wealth, when in actuality, poor stay poor and rich stay rich no matter if they are in Laxmangarh or New Delhi.

Bigger from *Native Son* faces a social discrimination in his community which forces him to commit extreme actions in order to express his anger towards racism. Movies and newspapers suppress Bigger’s image of himself and makes him believe in white superiority: “ Here are the daughters of the rich taking sunbaths in the sands of Florida! This little collection of debutantes represents over four billion dollars of America’s wealth and over fifty of America’s leading families. . .” (Wright 31). The Pop culture always illustrates the beautiful white people who are rich and happy. By telling the amount of money that the white people live with, makes Bigger feel crushed and weak because he could never compete with them. White people are also portrayed as being highly educated and good at managing finance, which would be an acceptable reality for Bigger: “ Those were smart people; they know how to get hold of money, millions of it” (Wright 33). Pop culture makes him believe that because of his skin color he will never possess large amount of money or have a job with high payment.

Bigger’s whole life is spent living in poverty along with every other black person in Chicago. South Side is a poverty-stricken neighborhood of Chicago.
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Black people are forced to live there because they cannot afford to rent or buy any other home, or the white landlords are not willing to rent it out to a black person. This leads to horrible conditions among the households: overcrowding, not enough natural resources such as water and gas and lack of privacy: “ He crawled back to the chimney, seeing before his eyes an image of the room of five people, all of them blackly naked in the strong sunlight, see through a sweaty pane: the man and woman moving jerkily in the tight embrace, and the three children watching” (Wright 247). He had to get away from seeing little, naked kids watch their parents have sex, because he knows that it is not something little kids should see but they have no other solution for their conditions that they're in. Such a situation resembles Bigger's own childhood, because he experienced the same kind of constricting scenario. This situation makes Bigger even more angry at the white population, because he knows it is because of them that the black people are segregated and forced to comply to living in conditions that they live in.

As Bigger changes his locations and social settings, his mindset changes with them. The Daltons' house was an extreme shock to him after seeing the luxurious, powerful life that those white people were living, which in turn made him feel very self conscious and even more pressured and insecure about his race, On the smooth walls were several paintings whose nature he tried to make out, but failed. He would have liked to examine them, but dared not. Then he listened; a faint sound of piano music floated to him from somewhere. He was sitting in a white home; dim lights burned round him; strange objects challenged him; and he was feeling angry and

uncomfortable. (Wright 45) When he is present in house of white people he is so afraid of what white people can do to him that he dares not to do anything to anger them or get punished for. His feeling of anger comes from his feelings of unfairness towards segregation, yet he does not change his behavior when he is surrounded by the whites. Instead he acts submissive like the rest of the black population. That leads to him feeling uncomfortable with himself and the location he is at. The frozen rooftop on which Bigger was captured near the end of the novel serves as a metaphor for his inability to go any further and the only option he has is to surrender to the police as he entraps himself at the rooftop and made the police job easier: " Dizzily, he drew back. This was the end. There were no more roofs over which to run and dodge." (Wright 265) It serves as metaphor because the scene figuratively compares Bigger's inability to move forward in life as well as literally not being able to move due to hunger and coldness. The freezing temperature and snow were the setting that was set up to work against Bigger and only made his situation worse.

Setting not only sets the mood for a novel, it makes the characters who they are and affects them and their decisions, which entirely influences the progression of the plot in the novel. Both Balram and Bigger were pushed by the society around them to act the way they did and because of their location and surroundings, the outcome for each character turned out to be extremely different. While Balram became rich and successful entrepreneur because his society enable him to hide out in the crowd since million Indian men look exactly like him, Bigger was captured and sentenced to death because he was isolated in his society as he was of a different skin color.

Citations

Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger: A Novel*. New York: Free, 2008. Print

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1940. Print