

The complex use of symbolism within adiga's social critique, 'the white tiger'



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In his novel 'The White Tiger', Avarind Adiga explores the corruption and extreme poverty that plague modern India. Through an allegorical depiction of the enormous divide between rich and poor, Adiga condemns the oppression and hopelessness endured by the lower classes. Furthermore, illustrating the multitude of obstacles to the empowerment of the poor, Adiga suggests that the emergence of class consciousness is of greatest importance in allowing individuals to escape the 'Rooster Coop'. Adiga presents Balram's entrepreneurial journey as evidence of the capacity for members of the lower classes to ultimately craft their own identity, symbolically emphasising his success in earning himself a place in the Light.

Through a symbolic representation of the hardships endured by India's poor and the exploitative behaviour of the upper classes, Adiga condemns the social structure of New India, which facilitates such pervasive inequality. In the early pages of his epistolary novel, Adiga includes an evocative description of the funeral of Balram's mother, whose corpse is burned and abandoned to the "black mud" of the Ganga River. Adiga establishes the repugnant river as a symbol of the hopelessness endured by those in the Darkness, suggesting that although Balram's mother's body was "trying to fight the black mud", it was "sucking her in" and she would inevitably become "part of the black mound". Balram expresses his realisation that this struggle is emblematic of not only his mother's life, but the adversity faced by all inhabitants of the Darkness, who despite their efforts, would never be "liberated". Symbolism is also used by Adiga to depict the 'two countries' within India. Adiga conveys that the 'Light' encompasses the wealthy coastal regions and the 'Darkness' incorporates the impoverished

rural regions of India, such as Balram's village of Laxmangarh. Through this portrayal of the completely contrasting halves of India, Adiga emphasises the dichotomy between the rich and the poor which largely eliminates any possibility of social mobility. Adiga furthers his critique of India's social system through the figurative description of the upper classes as "Men with Big Bellies" and the poor as "Men with Small Bellies", creating an association between the incredible wealth of the upper classes and their greed and "Big Bellies". Adiga elucidates that the elite of Indian society gained their position by "eat[ing] everyone else up", underscoring the ferocity of the 'food-chain' of India's social system. This concept is also developed through Adiga's use of an animal allegory to represent the four landlords of Laxmangarh. Adiga conveys that the Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar and Raven "fed on the village and everything that grew in it", until the villagers were unjustly left with "nothing ... to feed on" themselves. Furthermore, Adiga highlights the hardships suffered by those in the Darkness on an individual level through the contrast made by Balram between a rich man's body and that of a poor man. While a rich man's physique is "white and soft and blank", a poor man's frame is recognisable by its many "nicks and scars" and the clavicle which curves around his neck "like a dog's collar." Adiga conveys that the "story of a poor man's life" is represented on his body, which serves as tangible evidence of his suffering and poverty. Using allegorical elements to emphasise the suffering of India's lower classes, Adiga denounces the class system which forces the majority of the population to remain downtrodden their entire lives.

In 'The White Tiger', Adiga also utilises symbolism to emphasise the necessity of individuals attaining class consciousness in order to escape their poverty and oppression. As Balram begins resenting his master for exploiting him, such as through forcing him to take responsibility for "a killing [he] had not done", Adiga illustrates that he gains an awareness of the wider injustices faced by the lower class. The Stork's visit to a private hospital in a "big beautiful glass building", is contrasted in Balram's mind with Vikram's pitiable death in a decrepit village hospital, symbolic of his complete powerlessness. Through the disparity between these two episodes, Adiga further develops the dualities of the novel, exemplifying the inequality between the 'two castes' of India and providing justification for Balram's anger towards the upper classes. Balram's emerging resentment towards India's elite is also illustrated by Adiga through Balram's representation of Delhi as a living, sentient being. Balram imagines that Delhi agrees to "speak to [him] of civil war" and of "blood on the streets" and promises that the corrupt Minister's assistant "with the fat folds under his neck" will be the first to die in the bloodshed. Adiga conveys that Balram begins to perceive support for his cause everywhere in Delhi, as "dense pollution" informs him his crime will be well-hidden and a guard "puts down his gun" in an action that tells Balram "[he'd] do the same, if [he] could." The symbolic expression of Balram's desire for a class uprising is included by Adiga in order to demonstrate that Balram's later violent actions stem not only from self-interest, but the yearning for the revolution of India's social system, dominated by the rich capitalists of the upper classes, such as the Minister's assistant. Adiga further highlights Balram's resentment of his masters through his spitting "over the seats of the Honda City". Just as he spits at

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Laxmangarh in the first chapter, vowing never again to return, Balram illustrates his complete rejection of Ashok and the elite class he represents through this “disgusting” action. Adiga further emphasises the vital role of Balram’s class consciousness in his escape from the Rooster Coop, through the method of his final climactic murder of Ashok. Adiga establishes “Johnnie Walker Black” whiskey as a symbol of the prestige of the upper classes, describing it as too expensive to ever be bought by those in the Darkness, who are mere “Indian liquor men”. Thus Balram’s decision to fashion the empty bottle from Ashok’s car into a murder weapon, with “long and cruel and clawlike jags” of glass, is representative of his rage towards Ashok’s privilege and decision to use his own prestige against him. Depicting Balram’s escape from the ‘Rooster Coop’, Adiga provides a metaphorical representation of his emerging awareness of the unjust class stratification of Indian society.

Following Balram’s metamorphosis from poor villager to successful businessman of the Light, Adiga uses symbolic elements to underscore the capacity for individuals to forge their own identity. Even in his first letter to Wen Jiabao, Balram expresses pride in his office space, which is “the only 150-square-foot space in Bangalore with its own chandelier!” While it literally “fling[s] light across the room”, the chandelier also serves as a figurative representation of Balram’s place in the Light of India, stemming from his newfound wealth and social position. Balram’s later explanation that the light of the chandelier keeps “the lizards away”, is included by Adiga to emphasise that Balram represses his former identity as an Indian villager, represented by the ‘lizards’ that terrified him as a boy. Adiga also

establishes a complex duality between Ashok and Balram throughout the novel, represented in the rear view mirror of the Honda City, in which the men's " eyes meet so often" and serves as a conduit for confrontation between master and servant. Through his observation of Ashok in the mirror, Balram finds justification for his eventual murder of his master in Ashok's philandering and corrupt behaviour, but also learns how to behave as an authentic member of India's elite, noticing details such as the " empty and white" t-shirts Ashok wears. This ultimately assists him in crafting his new identity. Significantly, Adiga presents Balram's visit to the National Zoo as the catalyst for his murder of Ashok. Standing in front of the " creature ... born only once every generation", Balram's " eyes met" the white tiger's eyes, in the same way his " master's eyes [had] met [his] so often in the mirror of the car." Through this encounter, Adiga conveys that just as Balram gradually appropriates the identity of his master, he is able to fully assume his identity as ' The White Tiger' in order to commit the act of brutality that propels him into the Light. Adiga provides final evidence of Balram's success in the creation of his new persona as a successful businessman, through the name he takes on - " Ashok Sharma", symbolic of his replacement of Mr Ashok in the Light. Adiga suggests that identity is ultimately malleable, using symbolism to highlight Balram's transformation from villager, to white tiger, to wealthy businessman.

In ' The White Tiger', Adiga uses symbolism to highlight the enormous dichotomy between the rich and poor in India, and condemn the oppression endured by those in the Darkness. Adiga also uses symbolism to underscore the importance of an awareness of wider class injustices in society in

facilitating an escape from the Darkness into the Light. Furthermore, the capacity for individuals to transform their identity is emphasised through Adiga's allegorical representation of Balram's abandonment of his identity as a poor villager and creation of his persona as Ashok Sharma.