

3

Structural Violence in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This paper analyses how Adiga's *The White Tiger* places the spotlight on structural violence in modern India caused by the existing socio-political and economic disparities in the country. By taking recourse to Johan Galtung's critical concept, "structural violence" and Paul Gready's ideas of "social marginalisation", "political exclusion" and "economic exploitation", this paper argues that the protagonist of the novel represents underprivileged people in India, who are the victims of structural violence – unequal distribution of fundamental rights such as health, education, representation, employment and even the infrastructures of development by the existing socio-political and economic structures of the country. Although structural violence is indirect and invisible, it is capable of driving the victims to commit direct crimes. Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel, as a victim of structural violence, comes to commit a crime without a moment's hesitation. Since structural violence is a driving force to commit a crime, it must be checked by those in power to establish socio-political and economic harmony in a particular country or community. This article makes a significant contribution in a couple of areas of critical concern. It contributes by bringing the victims of structural violence into the purview of critical analysis. It also contributes by showing how structural violence is a slow poison and hence, it should be addressed on time for social, political and economic justice.

Keywords: Structural Violence, Crime, Injustice, Poverty, Corruption

Introduction

Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize-awarded debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008) unflatteringly unfolds the pathetic plight of poor people in modern India in the period when India is projected as a country of social, political and economic glory in the international arena. As a

post-revolution novel, it unveils the dark side of Indian society ravaged by poverty, injustice, superstitions, exploitation of the poor and a host of other social evils when India is taken as a global power amidst scientific and technological advancement. Undoubtedly, India is a socially, politically and economically fast-growing country but certain groups of people are still victims of poverty, inequality, injustice, casteism, corruption, majority regime, social, political, economic disparities, and a host of other problems.

This paper argues that the protagonist of the novel represents underprivileged people in India, who are the victims of structural violence – unequal distribution of fundamental rights such as health, education, representation, employment and even the infrastructures of development by the existing socio-political and economic imperatives of the country. Structural violence though is indirect and invisible; it is capable of driving the victims to commit direct crimes. Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel, as a victim of structural violence, comes to commit a crime without a moment's hesitation. Since structural violence is a driving force to commit a crime, it must be checked by those in power to establish socio-political and economic harmony in a particular country or community.

Literature Review

The literature review shows that the dimension of structural violence in the novel has received only sketchy and oblique attention from critics. Dr Ramandeep Mahal and Maharishi Markandeshwar, for example, interpret this novel as having captured the theme of “social issues of present-day society like debasement, destitution, ignorance, betting, western culture, casteism, wrongdoing, joblessness, mission for personality, forlornness, rehabilitation and so on” (5646). They, however, do not look at the role of socio-political structure in depriving a certain group of people of their basic rights. Similarly, Snehal Shingavi argues that the novel is “a critique of crony capitalism and an endorsement of entrepreneurialism” (8). But the perspective of structural violence goes missing. Likewise, Mst. Rekha Parvin and Md. Chand Alithe observe this novel as a “shocking insights of the corrupted rich people over the poor” (24). Their line of analysis from the lens of structural violence falls short.

In the same way, linking human rights and development, Lena Khor makes an argument that “the ruthless form which Halwai’s thoughts and actions taken is but the logical outcome of a world where underdevelopment, modernisation, and neoliberal globalisation in tandem” (42). In the discussion of human rights and development, the critic does not highlight the violation of human rights caused by the existing social institutions herein. Likewise, Sundhya Walther argues, “*The White Tiger* employs a language of species that is useful for its representation of subalternity, even if its focus is not nonhuman animals, but rather human beings” (592). Here also, no discussion of structural violence is found for the reduction of someone into the position of subalternity. In the same vein, Virendra Patel and Dr Hitendra Dhote interpret this novel as “how the desire to become rich makes people corrupt and dehumanised through the physical, moral, existential and material transformation of Balram Halwai from poor, innocent to highly corrupt” (5320). Here also the critical approach of structural violence goes missing.

By the same token, Betty Joseph observes the novel as “a critique of neoliberalism that exposes these connotations depends first on foregrounding the ways in which the novel adopts the clichés of a neoliberal economic doctrine and transforms them into speech issuing from an illegitimate spokesman: an uneducated rural migrant and murderer who self-identifies as a successful “entrepreneur” (72). Here also, the critic overlooks how the so-called neoliberalism is a productive ground to make certain groups of people structurally deprived of their fundamental rights. Likewise, for A.J. Sebastian, *The White Tiger* “is an excellent social commentary on the poor-rich divide in India” (244). The critic, here also does not talk about the gap between the poor and rich caused by structural violence. Similarly, for the critics, Dr. Vinita Singh Chawdhry and R. Renuka Narasiman the “focus of Adiga’s novel is that even though India is a developing economy the poor are still under poverty line” (230). The critics do not give much focus on the root cause of growing poverty through structural violence in their analysis.

Similarly, Dr Shipra Malik argues that the novel is about “a startling contrast between India’s rise as a global economy and the plight of the marginalised class of society living in devastating rural

and urban poverty through Balram Halwai, the narrator and the protagonist" (672). Critical analysis from the perspective of structural violence also lacks in her criticism. Randeep Rana further asserts that *The White Tiger* "is a pulsating critique of the deep-rooted socio-economic inequality rampant in India" (454). His critiquing of the novel also does not take the line of structural violence for socio-economic inequality. According to Veena Sindhu, *The White Tiger* "examines the issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption, urbanisation and poverty in India" (329). Her line of analysis, however, is also oblivious to structural violence and its role in the disparities and absurdities in Indian society. Since the above critical studies have not emphasised the issue of structural violence, this paper attempts to bridge this critical gap.

Textual Analysis/ Discussion

The White Tiger is the story of Balram Halwai also known as Munna, a servant from the poverty-stricken community of Bihar, India. He narrates his entire story to the Chinese Prime Minister who is supposed to be coming to India. He cannot continue his study due to poverty. At school, the inspector praises him as an "intelligent, honest, and vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots" (35). The school inspector identifies him as a white tiger, "the rarest of animals – the creatures that comes along only once in a generation" (35). In search of a job, the protagonist goes to the capital city, Delhi, where he gets a job as a driver. His master, Mr. Ashok is a rich and corrupt businessman. In Delhi, he becomes a laughing stock for his master, who not only humiliates him but tries to dehumanise him from time to time. His master even forces him to take charge of murdering a child killed by Pinky, Mr. Ashok's wife while driving-in-drinking. Delhi teaches the protagonist nothing but exploitation, humiliation and dehumanisation of poor people by the rich ones. By being a victim of such injustice, he becomes homicidal and finally kills his master and takes his money, which his master is planning to give as a bribe to the politician. By taking money, he goes to Bangalore, the city of information technology and runs a call centre. He, hence, turns out to be an entrepreneur from an ordinary village boy though through foul means.

The narrator, Balram Halwai, writes a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, in which he expresses and exposes the pathetic plight of the poor in India. The poor are fated to live amidst a lack of basic facilities while the rich ones are enjoying privileges. As he explains to Chinese Premiere, “our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs” (4). This explicates two sides of India – one is the dark side in which people are deprived of basic things and the other is the bright side, in which entrepreneurs, who represent high-class people, are in comfort zones with all facilities. He further talks about India, “Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river” (14). India of light represents India of structurally powerful people while India of dark represents structurally powerless people whose life is utterly horrible. Powerless people are the real victims of structural violence.

Johan Galtung in his seminal article, “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research” uses the critical idea, of “structural violence”. For him, “structural violence is inequality, above all in the distribution of power” (175). When the social, economic and political powers are unequally distributed, certain groups of people are devoid of their fundamental rights and even cannot get the privileges of the state. The narrator places the spotlight on the lack of infrastructural development in his poverty-stricken village by saying, “There is no hospital in Laxmangarh, although there are three different foundation stories for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections” (47), which shows how the political corruption contributes to structural violence.

Structural violence is invisible while personal violence is visible. However, the invisibility of structural violence makes certain groups of people poor and powerless. As Galtung distinguishes between them “personal violence is meaningful as a threat, a demonstration even when nobody is hit, and structural violence is also meaningful as a blueprint, as an abstract form without social life, used to threaten people into subordination” (172). Structural violence always remains a threat to those who are in the lower hierarchy in social strata, which

leaves them destitute. This paper also concentrates on the idea of Paul Gready that “structural violence can be conceptually divided into three major pillars: social marginalisation, political exclusion and economic exploitation” (15). In the novel, the protagonist is the victim of social marginalisation, political exclusion and economic exploitation.

Firstly, he becomes the victim of the so-called feudal system in his village, Laxmangarh which does not let him get an education and grow up respectably. The poor people of the whole village are under the exploitation of so-called landlords. The protagonist describes the exploitation of poor people by the landlords thus:

The Buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, and each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him. The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village. (24)

The protagonist identifies landlords in the animal-bird image, who own the resources in the village and exploit the poor people by imposing taxes and dehumanising them. Similarly, he identifies Strork's brother as the Wild Boar, who “owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages” (24). In the same vein, the protagonist identifies another landlord as the Raven, who “owned the worst land, which was the dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze with their flocks. If they didn't have their money, he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him the Raven” (24-25). This shows the monopoly of so-called landlords in all resources in the village and the condition of the poor therein. The narrator explains the luxury of the landlords in the following lines thus:

All four of the Animals lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh – the landlords' quarters. They had their temples inside the mansions, and their wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed. Once upon a time, the children of the four Animals went around town in their cars; Kusum remembered

those days. But after the Buffalo's son had been kidnapped by the Naxals – perhaps you've heard about them, Mr. Jiabao, since they're Communists, just like you, and go around shooting rich people on principle – the four Animals had sent their sons and daughters away, to Dhanbad or to Delhi. (25)

The narratives reflect the luxurious life of the rich ones with all facilities inside their big houses while people like Balram Halwai are fated to live a miserable life under exploitation, poverty and humiliation. The references to "Naxals" and the kidnapping of Buffalo's "son" by them implicitly hint that disgruntled people are taking recourse to violence to fight against the established socio-economic structures of the country, which have brought a gap between the rich and the poor. The sending of their sons and daughters to safe places by landlords due to the threat of Naxals exposes distinctly two classes – the powerful and the powerless in modern India. The rich are powerful and can give good education to their sons and daughters while the poor are under utter darkness without education and other basic rights. The narrator highlights the existing corruption, one of the causes of structural violence, through the following lines thus:

There was supposed to be free food at my school – a government programme gave every boy three *rotis*, yellow *daal*, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never saw *rotis*, or yellow *daal*, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money, (32).

The poor people are even deprived of state-sponsored privileges due to existing corruption. To stop dropouts from school, the government program of supplying food for the children is suspended as the school teacher misuses the lunch money. "Corruption is a form of structural violence because it is about private gain at public expenses", as George Kent affirms (135). It is the corruption that drives, more particularly, oppressed people to get the real benefits consequently; they are more frustrated and upset. When India is exposed as a technologically advanced country across the globe, the narrator ironically exposes the other side of India, where people are dying of tuberculosis. As the narrative goes:

When he began spitting blood that morning, Kishan and I took him by boat across the river. We kept washing his mouth with water from the river, but the water was so polluted that it made him spit more blood.

Later on, Kishan's father dies of tuberculosis and the doctor explains that he has "seen it before in rickshaw-pullers. They get weak from their work" (50).

Tuberculosis is a minor disease at present; however, the poor like rickshaw pullers in India are dying of it. Due to a lack of sufficient food, they are weak and more vulnerable to even minor diseases. Balram satirizes the corrupted doctor which shows class discrimination clearly:

"Now, you – Dr. Ram Pandey –will kindly put one-third of your salary in my palm. Good boy. In return, I do this.' He made a tick on the imaginary ledger. 'You can keep the rest of your government salary and go work in some private hospital for the rest of the week. Forget the village. Because according to this ledger you've been there. You've treated my wounded leg. You've healed that girl's jaundice.'" (21)

This is not only the reflection of the pervasive corruption in the medical field but also the absurdities and anomalies in bureaucracy in India. The existing dowry system is another evil in so-called shining India, due to which, the poor are always helpless, restless and frustrated. The narrator explains Kishan's marriage indicating the dowry system thus:

It was one of the good marriages. We had the boy, and we screwed the girl's family hard. I remember exactly what we got in dowry from the girl's side, and thinking about it even now makes my mouth fill up with water: five thousand rupees cash, all crisp new unsoiled notes fresh from the bank, plus a Hero bicycle, plus a thick gold necklace for Kishan. (51)

The above narrative reflects the happiness of the receiver of the dowry, the boy's family but one can easily understand the plight of the girl's family who is to give the dowry to the prospective bridegroom. The dowry system as a social evil has crippling and coercive effects on underclass people. The narrator also talks about two castes in modern India "in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up" (64). The terms "Big Bellies" and "Small Bellies" distinctly mark the rich class and the poor class. The first one has luxurious life while the second one is oppressed by the first one. Since the "Big Bellies" have political power, they easily use the underclass population to materialise their vested interest. As

Claudio Schuftan rightly says, “Poverty, part and parcel of the global free-market system, is the world’s greatest killer. It is not enough to improve the situation of the poor within the existing social relationships. The poverty of the poor demands that we build a different, more just social order” (308). The political exclusion of the underclass becomes clear from the following narratives:

I had to be eighteen. All of us in the tea shop had to be eighteen, the legal age to vote. 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. I had overheard this from a customer. This was supposed to be a close election; he had got a good price for each one of us from the Great Socialist Party. (97)

The novelist bitinglly criticizes the political corruption and unfair election system in India, the largest democracy in the world. This sort of unfair election and political corruption lead certain rich and powerful people in policy making and hence, no expectation is there from them to do something good to uplift the status of the powerless and underclass people. This makes the situation of the poor even worse. The narrator further brings the so-called tall claims of corrupted politicians to the fore thus:

The health minister today announced a plan to eliminate malaria in Bangalore by the end of the year...In other news, the chief minister of the state today announced a plan to eliminate malnutrition in Bangalore in six months. He declared that there would be not one hungry child in the city by the end of the year ...In other news; the finance minister declared that this year’s budget will include special incentives to turn our village into a high-technology paradise.... (219)

The above lines show the sugar-coated statements of politicians who claim to eliminate all kinds of injustice, and discrimination and move towards the path of development but things simply do not happen, and finally, people are habituated to “swallow this crap”(219). The narrator recounts the story of his father thus:

“It’s the way it always is,” my father told me that night. “I’ve seen twelve elections – five general, five states, two local – and someone else has voted for me twelve times. I’ve heard that people in the other India get to vote for themselves – isn’t that something?”(100)

The narrator's father never got a chance to cast his vote as his right as someone else did it. The poor are deprived of their voting rights in a democracy. What can be more ironic than this one? The powerful people never let underclass people choose their representatives as they just want to use them as ladders to the rich at the top. They never want awareness among common people. As Galtung asserts, "Those who benefit from structural violence, above all those who are at the top, will try to preserve the status quo so well geared to protect their interest" (179). It means they expect common people to be under their grip all the time taking advantage of their economic backwardness. The miserable condition of economically backward Indians is noticeable in the narrative, "Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the Darkness too – you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal-like way they live under the huge bridges", as the protagonist states (119). The most horrible situation can be seen in the jails of Delhi where the drivers are "behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters" (169). When their masters commit the crime of hit-and-run; their servants have to take the blame and are fated to live inside the cell. This is nothing but the dehumanisation of the poor by the so-called rich people. "We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse. Yes, that's right: we all live in the world's greatest democracy" (169), asserts the narrator. Few rich people controlling the majority of poor people in modern India is exposed by the narrator in the following lines:

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands, he will throw it back at you with a curse. (175-176)

The narrator being aware of the plight and predicament of the poor in so-called technologically shining India becomes frustrated and that drives him to commit a crime. He narrates his journey from an innocent village boy to an ignominious city boy as "how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness" (197). The condition of working-class people in Delhi and their dehumanisation by their masters make the protagonist rebellious. The corrupted nature of his

master drives the protagonist to murder his own master. By reading *Murder Weekly*, the idea of murdering his master germinates in the mind of the narrator. To escape from the domain of utter poverty and injustice, he decides to kill his master and seize the red bag full of money, which his master is planning to bribe the politicians in return for his taxes settled. He soliloquizes before murdering his master thus:

Go on, just look at the red bag, Balram – that’s not stealing, is it?
I shook my head.
And even if you were to steal it, Balram, it wouldn’t be stealing.
How so? I looked at the creature in the mirror.
See – Mr. Ashok is giving money to all these politicians
in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay. And who
owns that tax, in the end? Who but the ordinary people of this country –
you! (244).

Finally, he kills his master with a broken bottle and seizes the money and goes to Bangalore and starts running call centres. The narrator further narrates his plan to Chinese Primer thus:

After three or four years in real estate, I think I might sell everything,
take the money, and start a school – an English-language school – for
poor children in Bangalore. A school where you won’t be allowed to
corrupt anyone’s head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi –
nothing but the facts of life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers,
unleashed on Bangalore! (319).

These lines show the real attitude of the narrator, who is highly concerned with the poor. Since his past was poverty-stricken, he plans to do something to uplift the status of the poor by giving them pragmatic education to make their life fruitful enough. He is well aware of the fact that the existing socio-political and economic structures of the country should be revisited to establish equality and justice for all people devoid of class and caste. “Structures and not just individuals must be changed if the world is to change” (308), as Claudio Schuftan asserts.

Conclusion

The White Tiger, thus, is a powerful document, which faithfully unfolds the plight of certain groups of people in India as victims of poverty, inequality, oppression and injustice caused by the existing social, cultural, economic and political structure of the country.

Structural violence caused by unequal distribution of fundamental rights such as health, education, representation, employment and even the infrastructures of development by the existing socio-political and economic imperatives of the country, is a curse that always brings a rift between powerful and powerless. Although indirect and invisible, structural violence tends to motivate the victims to commit direct crimes. Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel, as a victim of structural violence, commits a crime without hesitation. Since structural violence is capable of driving the victims to commit crimes, it must be checked by those in power to establish socio-political and economic harmony in a particular country or community. Undoubtedly, India is a socially, politically and economically fast-growing country but certain groups of people are still victims of poverty, inequality, injustice, casteism, corruption, majority regime, and social, political and economic disparities. It is the immediate duty of the authorities to do away with structural violence to make the nation peaceful, prosperous and powerful.

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