

The White Tiger by Aravinda Adiga

Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri*



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Aravind Adiga's wry and satirical debut novel *The White Tiger*, takes the form of a series of letters to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, from Balram Halwai, the Bangalore businessman who is the self-styled "White Tiger" of the title. Bangalore is the Silicon Valley of the subcontinent, and on the eve of a state visit by Jiabao, our entrepreneur Balram Halwai wishes to impart something of the new India to the Chinese premier - "out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse."

Balram's lesson about the new India is drawn from the rags-to-riches story of his own life. He begins at the very bottom, without so much as a name; his family calls him only "Munna," or "boy." His mother might have named him, but she was too busy dying of TB. His father was too busy pulling a rickshaw, weakening himself to be claimed by the same disease. A schoolteacher has to name him instead; later, a local official decides on his date of birth in order to facilitate the stealing of his vote. The son of a rural rickshaw-puller, his family is too poor for him to be able to finish school, and instead he has to work in a teashop, breaking coals and wiping tables. Through these experiences, Balram learns much about the world and later states that the streets of India provided him with all the education he needed. To use the imagery deployed by the novelist, he is from the "Darkness": "Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two

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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." The black river is the Ganges, beloved of the sari-and-spices tourist image of India. ("No! - Mr Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids.")

After learning how to drive, Balram gets his break when a rich man from his village, "The Stork", hires him as a chauffeur, allowing him to live in Delhi, the "Light." The city is a revelation. As he drives his master and his family to shopping malls and call centers, Balram becomes increasingly aware of immense wealth and opportunity all around him, while knowing that he will never be able to gain access to that world. "With their tinted windows up, the cars of the rich go like dark eggs down the roads of Delhi. Every now and then, an egg will crack open - a woman's hand, dazzling with gold bangles, stretches out of an open window, flings an empty mineral water bottle onto the road - and then the window goes up, and the egg is resealed."

The life of the poor, however, is very different: "Go to Old Delhi behind Jama Masjid and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench--the stench of terrified, feathered flesh..... The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country."

To sum up: "In the old days there were 1,000 castes...in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies."

There is no trace in Balram's story--himself perhaps excepted--of any rising middle class. He begins in the rural "Darkness," a world of landlord and peasant. And when he escapes to the "Light" of the cities, it is into a world of servants and masters.

The secret of India, he tells Wen, is the way that its extreme inequality is stabilized by its strong family structures: "Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many."

Advancement can be achieved only by patronage and corruption--if you make friends with the local political thugs, you might get a job as a bus conductor--or by Balram's eventual method: stepping outside the "coop" of conventional morality. The White Tiger is a furious and brutally effective counterblast to smug "India is shining" rhetoric which also directs hard, well-aimed kicks at hypocrisy and thuggery on the traditionalist Indian Left.