

## Problems depicted in Contemporary Indian Fiction: A Study of *The White Tiger* and *Kala Padri*

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### Abstract:

*Arvind Adiga's The White Tiger and Tejinder's Kala Padri are the widely debated fictional works of contemporary times. The former is written in English while the latter is written in Hindi. Barring the different languages of expression however what brings the two works on common platform is their bold, candid and honest depiction of contemporary Indian society, especially the problems that afflict it. Both the works perform this role of social criticism with exceptional brilliance and savagery, and are relentless in their exposure of rotting India behind the glittering facade of 'new' and 'rising' India. In many ways they are the tales of two Indias, the India of Light and the India of Darkness, the cruel, exploitative, self-serving India and the hungry, aspiring India. The present paper attempts to enumerate and analyse the depiction of major problems that these two works so powerfully and effectively delineate.*

**Key words:** problems, real development, corruption, hunger, communalism, media, inequality

### Introduction:

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* and Tejinder's novel *Kala Padri* are published in English and Hindi respectively.

Literature is basically a reflection of life, human emotions and sensibilities. That is why the medium of this reflection or the language of literature is not very important. Hence what is important in literature is, how human life has been commented upon, what is its significance and what is new in it. Keeping in mind this essential spirit of literature in general this researcher has tried to analyse the contemporary problems reflected in the above two novels written in separate languages. What is remarkable about these two novels is that both make realistic commentary on the contemporary issues. The deep understanding of contemporary social, economic, religious, cultural problems is reflected in both the works.

In Indian context the study of the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be complete without understanding the last decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Because this is precisely the period when India opened its economy in 1991 and thereafter started the era of liberalization, market economy, consumerism, industrialization and globalization which has affected the lives of all Indians in some way. If this was the period that brought in new opportunities, prosperities, glitter of mall culture and abundance of Indian as well as foreign made consumer goods in the life of Indian consumer, then it was also the period when the IT power of India and telecom boom in India were realized. And this was also the period that brought in new problems. The above two novels are remarkable for their subtle and candid take on changing contemporary socio cultural realities of the time.

### **Discussion and Analysis:**

Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is his famous novel that brought him the year 2008 Man Booker Prize in which he comments on the contemporary system in a powerful way. Talking about his role as a writer in one of his interviews Adiga says:

“At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination.” (Jeffries 2008)

Basically *The White Tiger* is a novel about Balaram Halwai, a Bihari villager struggling with poverty and illiteracy, and his journey to glitter of richness. His father was rickshaw-puller. Balaram was named by his parents as Munna but the school teacher changed it to Balaram and the education inspector, impressed by Balaram's street smartness, called him “The white tiger” for Balram appeared to him “...an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots.” (Adiga, 2008:35) The word halwai is indicative of his low caste. The novel is remarkable for its narrative technique because the whole novel is in the form of letter which Balaram writes to the visiting Chinese premier Wen Jia Bow. And because Balaram, a common, rural laborer, is narrating his own story the novelist has succeeded in lending the whole narrative a touch and feel of authenticity.

The region from where Balaram comes is described by the novelist as India of Darkness which is marked by hunger, poverty and illiteracy, where the aspirations for better life exist but no opportunities are available. On the other hand there is India of Light with its glittering richness which is dominated by few Indians who are busy exploiting those who belong to India of Darkness. Within the India of Light there also exist the poor, spineless, helpless Indians who are made to live a life of filth and shame, whose lives are no better than animals, like the way they keep chickens 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

and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench –the stench of terrified, feathered flesh.” (Adiga, 2008:175) There seems to be a lack of willingness to hear to this poor but aspiring class in India. That is why Balaram says that India actually includes “...two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness.” (Adiga, 2008:14)

Forced to give up education to support his family by working in a village tea stall, Balaram gets the opportunity to come to Delhi when the rich man in the village needs driver for his ‘son and daughter-in-law and their two dogs’ living in Delhi. Actually it is from here Balaram’s real education begins. Here he gets an opportunity to observe and understand the lives of rich from close quarters and he finds that what is actually needed to become rich are dishonesty, greed, cruelty, corruptness and exploitative nature. These are the qualities that make one rich, finds Balaram. And the smart Balaram quickly learns these qualities while in Delhi. He not only masters these qualities but also masters the skill of committing crimes and justifying wrong doings with exceptional expertise and insensitivity. Therefore he describes his story as“...a tale of how I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness.’ (Adiga, 2008:197) While serving his master, he one day murders him and runs away with the booty of seven lakh rupees and begins his new business with that money in Bangalore and finally becomes rich businessman. That is why Balaram describes himself as good student, good philosopher and a good businessman. The interesting part of the novel is that the novelist while narrating this tale of rags to riches comments succinctly on the contemporary Indian society’s shortcomings and problems.

“*The White Tiger* is a penetrating piece of social commentary attuned to the inequalities that persist despite India’s new prosperity...inequality is a word that has been

successfully air-brushed out of existence.” (Iyer, 2011: 225) The novel presents a picture where India of Light and India of Darkness are put side by side. If India of Light is all about comfort, luxury and riches, then India of Darkness is all about poverty and hunger. The India of Darkness can see with envy the India of Light. It has its own aspirations, the IT and Telecom boom has made him well informed and it is impossible, nay dangerous to ignore their aspirations. After all how long can we talk of prosperity by creating just few islands of prosperities. The gaps have to be bridged with honesty or else it could spoil the health and harmony of society as a whole, it could jeopardize the very relevance of social and moral values. Therefore an all inclusive and balanced development can only guarantee a stable and strong nation and society. The demon of hunger, poverty and exploitation personified in Balaram is therefore not surprising because after all how long can one suppress one’s desire for better life. We have to create opportunities because suppression of dreams and desires produces perversion and spoils social health. When naxalite activities are seen in this context we understand why so many social commentators consider poverty as the root cause of naxalism. The former President of India Dr. A. P. J. Kalam also considers poverty as the biggest enemy of India that need to be defeated. On the dedicatory page of his book *Ignited Minds* Dr. Kalam writes “Our enemy is poverty. It is the root cause of our problems and should be the object of our fight, not our own.” (Kalam, 2002: dedicatory page) The present novel throws light on the exploitative consumerist culture of contemporary India that breeds, thrives and perpetuates social divide and inequality.

Yet another problem that pollutes and sickens the whole system like some contagious disease and which dries up the whole process of development and thus prevents gains of development from reaching the place where they are most needed is corruption. As a result inclusive growth and

development of all remains a distant dream and this gives birth to a social system of oppressed and oppressor which Balaram describes in these words “...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.” (Adiga, 2008:64) There seems no place for the middle ground. If one wishes to have a 'big belly,' one must destroy the part of oneself with a 'small belly.

In a sense the role of media is most crucial and full of responsibility in a democracy. Media effectively serves as a watch dog. It is the responsibility of media to make a careful and balanced scrutiny when it comes to policy making, implementation of policies and skills, pinpointing the lacunas and weaknesses in administration and help make it fit, responsive, sensitive and accountable. Today the scope and reach of media has enhanced significantly but most of its energy is used in running after sensationalism in an attempt to increase TRP. The result is sentimentalism triumphs over seriousness even while presenting news about most pressing issues like poverty, hunger, injustice, etc. And then starts the rat race of turning serious issues like hunger and poverty into glamorous ones. The novel lashes at this tendency of contemporary media that worships TRP and sensationalism instead of professional ethics.

Tejinder's Hindi novel *Kala Padri* published in the first decade of 21<sup>st</sup> century is another such contemporary fictional work that gives expression to most relevant contemporary pressing issues. It highlights many of the problems that contemporary India is grappling with especially in the context of rural Indian life. It focuses on rural, tribal place called Uraon in central India. It brings to light one of the stark realities of contemporary India in the context of globalization. It will not be an exaggeration to state that in the so-called globalized and glittering India the traditional and deep rooted markers of

discrimination based on caste and religion persist leading to rich-poor, upper-lower socio-economic divide. It is indeed ironical that while the talk of making a new India is heard louder the traditional and outdated notions that afflict Indian society are subtly retained and preserved. Those in power believe that playing with religious sentiments can bring them power. They feed the belief that religion is our identity and it brings bread and butter. That is the reason why religion dominates every aspect of our lives. People of all religions here strive hard to keep and preserve their religious identities. Hence communalism has become one of the major problems confronting Indian society. On the one hand tribals are converted to Christianity and on the other hand attempts are made to bring them back to Hinduism. When the Chief Minister of the State indulging in hollow rhetoric says that we should be proud of our tribal people and protect their culture the protagonist James Khakha, a tribal convert and a Christian priest says, “Unhe apne Adivasion ki sanskriti par garv hota hai, jab ki unhe sharm aani chaiye ki ve aaj bhi nange rahte hai.” (Tejinder, 2005: 101) Communalism and religious fanaticism thrives best on blind, unquestioning following leading to subservience and powerlessness of the followers. To the Belgian priests who have arrived in the village to ‘help and serve’ the tribals but actually to convert them by bribing them with provision of bare necessities like food and clothes, the protagonist asks as to how they manage to convert the tribals, to which they pretend innocence. They shamelessly hide their real intent behind the high sounding words like Will of God and service of humanity. The Belgian priests justify their act as God’s will. They say “...Prabhu ne inko dudh diya, khana diya, kapdaa diya, toh Prabhu ka shukarana to inko dena tha na, who ye log diya, hum inka bapismaa kiya, ye prabhu ka icha tha” (Tejinder, 2005: 44) Their shameless argument implies that since they have provided the tribals the tribals should pay back by converting to Christianity. Thus in the name of Jesus

tribals are enticed to convert to Christianity. The poor, ignorant, helpless and starving tribals are brainwashed by Christian missionaries into believing that by converting to Christianity all their pains and suffering will go away. From one level of subservience the helpless tribals are taken to another equally pathetic level of subservience as seen in the prayer which they are taught by Christian priests. “Prabhu hum tere bande hai | Hum bahut durbal hai, Parabhu humpar apni aashish barsa, jinke santan nahi hai, unke yaha santan ho, jinke putr raaha se bhatak gaye hai, unhe satya ka rasta dikha | Jo apaahij hai unhe change kar, andhon ko roshni de, langdo ko per de, beheron ko kaan de Prabhu, ye sab bimar hai, ve sab tere bande hain, inhe change kar--Amen” (Tejinder, 2005: 68) In the name of service of God the Christian missionaries enslave the tribals. They make them serve the priests and almost reduce their status to that of bonded labour. They force them to participate in the mass prayer. James Khakha feels angry at this, he considers it as another form of enslavement. He says, “Ab hum aur bardasht nahi karenge. Na begaar aur na prarthana. Kai baar bardasht karne ka hi dusra naam prarthna kar diya jata hai” (Tejinder, 2005:110)

Yet another pressing problem that the novel focuses on is hunger. Hunger makes man helpless and it also leads to his converting to another religion as seen in *Kala Padri*. Sometimes the same problem of hunger converts him into a beast. Describing the horrible condition of the starving, dying tribals, whose cause of death is not some mysterious incurable disease but hunger, Tejinder writes “Adivasi pichle kai dino se jaharili jungle butiya kha rahe hai aur jile ke bhitri eelako me to kuch log apni bhukh mitane ke liye billiyon aur bandaron ka shikar kar, unka mass tak kha rahe hai” (Tejinder, 2005: 21) When the poor, ignorant villagers try to cure a starving tribal, believing him to be haunted by evil spirit, with the help of self-proclaimed expert in black magic, James Khakha points out the grim reality that gods cannot save this dying man but rice can,



and those in possession of it won't share it with starving tribals unless their purpose is served. He says, "Is aadmi ko devta nahi, chaval bacha sakte hai...par chaval na uske paas hai, na gaonwalo ke paas aur jinke paas hai we inhe denekeliye taiyaar nahi hai"(Tejinder, 2005: 73) These days various types of hungers have emerged. Some are hungry for power; the others are hungry for money and wealth. Some are hungry for faith, others are hungry for fame. The major events in the novel bring to light these various types of hunger. The party in power allows tribals to die of hunger but refuses to give them food because they have not voted for the party. The church while pretending service of humanity refuses to give rice to the dying tribals because they have not changed their religion. The novel exposes this hypocrisy, double-talk and the desire to dominate the poor, helpless and hungry tribals. The basic problem of hunger of tribals remains unsolved. Their changing or not changing their religion hardly helps solve this problem. The nexus between politicians and priests further complicates this problem leading to the disillusionment of tribals.

The policies of the World Bank have been instrumental in the rise of India but the same policies are made to fail in their intent by the unscrupulous banking officials in India who work less for the salary they draw and more for the cuts and commission. Hence in the tribal and hilly jungle areas of India there is woeful lack of real development. The deep rooted corruption in the system results in the lack of electric power, education, roads and means of travel and communication that make the life of people here highly difficult. The novel presents faithful portrayal of all such problems. In essence the novel *Kala Padri* underlines the fact that unless and until these problems are addressed with honesty and integrity there can be no real, all-inclusive development that India aspires for.

## **Conclusion:**

The study of the depiction of problems in *The White Tiger* and *Kala Padri* substantiate the fact that common man today aspires for betterment and prosperity. He wants to be a part of glitter around him. He wants the surrounding prosperity to change his life for the better. He is ready to do anything and everything for this to happen. Balaram in *The White Tiger* murders his master and runs away with his money in order to start a new business and become rich. He has cultivated the belief that one can be rich only by being unscrupulous, immoral and corrupt. The ultimate truth that emerges in *Kala Padri* also underscores that the supporters of establishment want to become rich by betraying the simple, rural tribal folks and plundering what actually belongs to these deprived folks. In all this surrounding chaos there is one man who is kind and compassionate. He feels helpless before the all powerful system but is made to helplessly and silently look at the spectacle. He wishes to do something substantial for the real development of India and Indians but finds himself powerless to do so. There seems a woeful lacking in the contemporary India of those who can fearlessly fight for truth and justice. We have an ironical picture of problem of plenty on the one hand and problem of scarcity on the other. The major problems depicted in the two texts are corruption, hunger, communalism, inequality, role of media and need of real, all-inclusive development.

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