
The Machinations of Caste and Religion in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Paper Received on 07-11-2025, Accepted on 14-12-2025

Published on 15-12-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.4.515

Abstract

This paper tries to examine Aravind Adiga's maiden novel *The White Tiger* with emphasis on connotations to caste and religion and their role in the day to day lives of the characters found in the novel. Caste and religion have been integral to the Indian writings from yore as it is a dominant feature of Indian social fabric much like race is to the western and American societies. The paper tries to highlight the jugglery the protagonist Balram plays with these two.

Key words: The White Tiger, Caste, Religion

India has produced numberless story tellers right from the dawn of civilisation. Vyasa, Valmiki, Kalidasa and many others belong to the long pantheon of writers who wrote on the topics of their choice in different languages. However, the genius of their works couldn't reach the wider readership due to the fact that all these great writings had been in the vernacular whose reach is limited to minor parts of the Indian subcontinent. It was not until the nineteenth century the Indian writers got in touch with English language which gave them a far wider reach than any Indian language could have given.

Many great authors like Mulk Raj Anand, R K Narayan and Raja Rao are the avant garde that showed the way to the next generation of writers. These writers are called the big three of Indian English literature and rightly so; for they laid the foundations on which the edifice of Indian English literature mightily stands. Later

generations of writers like Anita Desai, Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie carried the baton and handed the same over to the present-day writers like Aravind Adiga, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahari.

Aravind Adiga coming as he did from a journalistic background carries the same sort of realistic appeal to the world of letters as did the chronicler Daniel Defoe who is credited with writing Robinson Crusoe, the first novel in English. One who reads his novels gets confused whether what one is reading is fiction or a report on the happenings in some corner of this great country for they carry an uncanny resemblance to the real happenings that we regularly watch on news channels. Furthermore, he has experimented with the topics and the choice of words which is rare for any Indian writer. In the opening pages of *The White Tiger* itself he breaks from tradition and refers to the number of gods of all primary religions using their names “(M)aking a grand total of 36000004 names” (8). As Ashish Gupta rightly points out in his observation that the writer has used the small letter ‘g’ in each of the beginning of the word ‘god’. (Gupta, 17)

A cursory look into the novels he has written and the topics he has dealt with explain the popularity he has amassed within a short time and as few as four novels under his belt. In his maiden novel *The White Tiger* (2008) which brought him the coveted Man Booker Prize he chronicles the rise of a protagonist Munna whose parents do not bother to give him even a name due to their own worries sprouting from poverty and disease to the level of an entrepreneur. With the help of his protagonist, he shows us two Indias one of abundant riches and another of abject poverty. The whole novel can be summed up as the protagonist’s desire to migrate from poverty which he calls the darkness to one of riches which he calls light.

The White Tiger deals with caste and religious differences which stare at us every single day. Balram Halwai, belonging to the caste of sweet makers is discouraged from becoming a driver for the reason that he is neither a Muslim nor a Rajput who are fit to take up that trade.

Adiga doesn’t mince words when it comes to say that religion is not just a matter of one’s faith but a political tool which can decide one’s future. The story of Ram Prasad is one good example. Ram Prasad has been in the service of the household for a long time he is faithful to the master’s family. Being good at driving and faithful to the employer are not enough. He has to take up a false name and identity to get and protect his job. He even creates the façade by having a dozen idols of Hindu gods and goddesses to avert any kind of suspicion.

Balram Halwai, determined to come out of the rooster coop leaves no stone unturned. He makes the maximum use of the people's blind infatuation for caste and religion. He puts the pretence of paying homage to every tree and temple he passes by when he takes his master Ashok and his American wife Pinky Madam to Laxmangarh. He wins over his American educated master by paying respects to every tree on the way.

Balram's cunning nature makes use of the religious segregation in the landlord's family to promote himself and get the opportunity to drive the Honda car to Delhi. When he gets to know that the driver who takes Ashok and his wife to Delhi would get an impressive sum he wants to have the chance for himself. He thinks of a possible ploy he could use to get Ram Prasad out of the way and get the chance for himself. His cunning mind remembers that Ram Prasad is keeping aloof these days and not joining for meals. He gets inquisitive and follows the senior driver. He gets to see his senior entering the mosque. He gets to know that Ram Prasad is indeed a Muslim in the guise of a Hindu. He shouts foul and gets him evicted. That one thing which would be generally considered his personal thing renders him disqualified for his job. Balram himself muses:

“(W)hat a miserable life he's had, having to hide his religion, his name, just to get a job as a driver-and he is a good driver, no question of it, a far better driver than I will ever be (110)

In another scene where the leader known as the great socialist visiting the landlord's house asks the son of the landlord to hold a spittoon in which he spits a whole lot of red spittle shows a tit for tot kind of action where the landlords son gets to have a taste of his own medicine for here it is the landlord who are considered as belonging to the upper castes is made to hold the spittoon.

The writer makes it overt by tagging the surname of Halwai which means a maker of sweet meats the surname of the protagonist to show that caste is a part of ones identity in India

Conclusion: With his very first novel Aravind Adiga tries to pull the bull by its horns by touching a very sensitive yet omnipresent problem of caste and religion. His disdain for things like caste and religion and the inane practices these things entail can be seen in his sarcasm on Balram's mother being draped in the best silken cloth and his advice to the Chinese premier to not to take a dip in the Ganges unless “unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion and seven different kinds of industrial acids.” (15)

RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | Vol. 10, Issue 4 (October, November & Dec;2025)

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