

Vol 3 Issue 5 Nov 2013

ISSN No :2231-5063

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# International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

## *Golden Research Thoughts*

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**RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595**

**ISSN No.2231-5063**

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## IMAGES IN THE WHITE TIGER



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**Abstract:** Indian author Aravind Adiga's maiden work of fiction *The White Tiger* that won him not only innumerable readers but also the Booker Prize in 2008 is "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian"<sup>1</sup>. It contains a gradually evolving, haphazardly-educated, freedom-loving, intelligent, pragmatic, self-made, though insecure underdog's anger and despair-laden vision of sharply-contrasted, twenty-first century Indias and Indians expressed through a number of images<sup>2</sup>, mostly of animals, insects and some other things. The present article seeks to analyze the diverse images and explain their roles and importance in the overall scheme of the novel.

**Key words:** Images, evolving, haphazardly-educated, freedom-loving, intelligent, pragmatic.

### INTRODUCTION:

The society, of which Balram Halwai, the central character, is a product and part, is replete with poverty, malnourishment, undergrowth, ugliness, exploitation, slavery, exhaustion and emptiness. In fact, it is like a jungle, not a Kipling-esque but a Darwinian jungle, full of animal-like human beings which perhaps accounts for the preponderance of animal images in the novel. Thus malnourished, underdeveloped and crushed specimens of humanity slaving in tea-shops are like ugly, crawling creatures, like spiders to be precise. The author comments that these human spiders "go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands."<sup>3</sup> and earn their precarious livelihood. Labourers working on construction sites in Delhi do not look "much bigger than mice"<sup>4</sup>, an image that emphasizes their stunted physical growth. Balram Halwai as a trainee driver and a mechanic, emerges from under a taxi "like a pig from sewage".<sup>5</sup> With a face blackened with grease and hands shiny with engine oil, he resembles a repulsive porcine creature. Rickshaw pullers, often "thin, sticklike men"<sup>6</sup> are human beasts of burden bearing a pyramid of middle-class flesh—some fat man with his fat wife and all their shopping bags and groceries. Servants of rich men who do duties by their masters and carry their heavy burdens silently and uncomplainingly are like asses carrying "rubble around for the rich".<sup>7</sup> Thousands of villagers who live on the sides of Delhi roads live like animals "under the huge bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars rolled passed them".<sup>8</sup> Women in Balram's household, packed in congested rooms, look like millipedes while they sleep. Their sleeping

posture and their insectlike appearance are graphically captured in the following lines: "At night they sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede".<sup>9</sup> Drivers waiting near the parking lot of a Delhi hotel, swirl key chains, chew pans, exchange gossip, urinate at intervals and "crouch and jabber like monkeys".<sup>10</sup> These men spill and dissect the secrets of their masters every evening with the stupidity and endless garrulity of simian creatures. They gaze at a mobile phone the way "monkeys gaze at something shiny they have picked up".<sup>11</sup> When the master deigns to consider a servant a member of his family, he (the servant) feels elated, the way a dog presumably does when its owner confers a special favour on the pet. Hence when the master calls Balram a member of the family, he feels "happy as a dog".<sup>12</sup> Balram has a natural, intuitive, effortless understanding of his master's ways. He understands Mr. Ashok Sharma in the same way in which "dogs understand their masters".<sup>13</sup> Dogs are loyal to their masters. Similarly, the drivers are steadfastly loyal to their masters who make them scapegoats for their misdeeds. Just as dogs rush after bones, servants run after a sensational pornographic magazine entitled *Murder Weekly*. Needless to say, the boredom and emptiness of the drivers' lives compel them to seek recreation and relief in stupid, degrading and cheap magazines. Laxmangarh landlords are named after animals according to their peculiarity of appetites. Thus they are called the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Buffalo and the Raven. On the other hand, Mr. Ashok, a member of the landlord's family and Balram's sometime master, is weak, helpless, absent-minded and completely unprotected by the usual instincts that run in the blood of a landlord. Had he been

in Laxmangarh, people would have called him “The Lamb”<sup>14</sup>. No wonder then that the White Tiger kills the Lamb. But it will be wrong to assume that it is only the India of Darkness that is a dark jungle. The India of Light too is a jungle. In other words, there are animals even in so-called civilized India. Bangalore, the centre of modern enterprise, the hub of computer industry and a bustling, ever-growing twenty-first century city in globalized India resembles a jungle teeming with rapacious, ferocious beastlike men who make the metropolis extremely unsafe for girls and women.

Thus, judged from a poor, humiliated, deprived and wronged subaltern’s viewpoint, a considerable number of animal like human beings of various shapes, sizes and intents exist, survive and (sometimes even) thrive in a lawless, problem-ridden, backward, jungle like country called India.

Though the animal images unquestionably predominate, there are images from other fields of life as well which, of course, are inseparably linked with the predominant images. For example, the irreconcilable differences between a rich man and a poor man are writ large on every lineament of their respective bodies which mirror the ways/qualities of their lives and their widely different financial conditions. The rich man’s body bears the telltale marks of his life. Hence his body is like a premium cotton pillow, white, soft and blank. On the contrary, as Balram Halwai says, “My father’s spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog’s collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in the flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into his buttocks.”<sup>15</sup>

In a perennially poverty-stricken family whosoever earns money, be he a human being or be it a bovine creature, becomes the supreme ruler of the family, the centre of attention and the recipient of care and food. No wonder then that the female water buffalo, initially the breadwinner of the Halwai family, usurps all attention and food. And she is justifiably called the dictator of the house. But when Balram, as a driver, starts earning money and sends it home, he replaces the bovine animal as the recipient of maximum attention and importance. On his own admission, “For the first time I can remember, I got more attention than the water buffalo”<sup>16</sup> For the same reason, when men return to Laxmangarh from towns and cities with hard-earned money, women swoop down upon them with the ferocity and rapidity of predatory animals. Adiga writes: “They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh”.<sup>17</sup> Laxmangarh voters deprived of their franchise and engaged in futile discussions of local elections are compared to “eunuchs discussing Kama Sutra.”<sup>18</sup> Just as eunuchs, deprived of the ability to have sex, take part in a vain discussion of the famed sexual treatise, the voters of Laxmangarh discuss the pre-electoral activities although electoral malpractices, very common in rural India, do not allow them to cast their votes. Then, the poor are likened to hens and roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, pecking each other—shitting on each other and jostling for breathing space. Knowing full well that their death is imminent, they never try to break the cage and come out of it. A detailed explication of this particular image

brings out its appositeness. The Indian poor are like hens and roosters in the sense that both are weak, defenseless and dispensable, that both are engaged in futile mutual fights and are incapable of fighting against masters. Furthermore, both wallow in filth and squalor and although both are aware of the imminence of death, they are unable to revolt and wrest freedom. Adiga observes that the Indian poor have been taught to “exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man’s hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse.”<sup>19</sup> It is because of their deep-rooted psychological slavery that they retain their faith in gods, though gods, like the large majority of incompetent and indifferent Indian politicians, do nothing to improve their lot.

Last but not the least, the images used in connection with Balram Halwai. Despite his highly flawed educational background, he is a bibliophile. For him, the smell of books is life-enhancing, it is “like oxygen.”<sup>20</sup> He is an autodidact, a self-taught man reading and enjoying Urdu poets like Rumi, Iqbal and Mirza Ghalib which has made his mind sensitive and his observation keen. The sensitivity of his mind and keenness of his observation are reflected in the following images: “Rusting exhaust fans turn slowly in the ventilators of the restaurants like the wings of giant moths.”<sup>21</sup> Again, Urdu, the language of the Muslims has been described by him as a collection of “scratches and dots, as if some crow dipped its feet in black ink and pressed them to the page.”<sup>22</sup> He is a fast learner adapting himself to various circumstances and assimilating various experiences and this ability of his explains his gradual transformation from a raw, callow, small town lad into a stick-at-nothing, ambitious, smart Bangalore-based businessman. Naturally, he is likened to sponge, a highly absorbent thing. He says, “We are like sponges—we absorb and grow.”<sup>23</sup> And above all, he is a white tiger, a very rare creature that comes along only once in a generation which is why he succeeds in breaking the adamant cycle of slavery by disposing of his lamb-like master and setting himself up as a modern entrepreneur in the capital of outsourcing technology so that he may taste freedom knowing full well, of course, that his spell of freedom, his reign of glory may well be uncertain and brief.

Thus, the use of images helps the author to explain themes, depict characters and present a particular vision of society. It also enables him to lend his narrative an extra depth, a sombre tone and a strange beauty.

#### Notes

1. Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (New Delhi, Harper Collins Publishers India & India Today Group, 2008) p10 All further references are to this edition.
2. Images here signify figurative language, especially the vehicles of metaphors and similes and, in some cases, picturesque verbal descriptions.
3. p51
4. p158
5. p57
6. p27
7. p193
8. p120
9. p21

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- 10. p201
- 11. p153
- 12. p166
- 13. p112
- 14. p142
- 15. p27
- 16. p84
- 17. p26
- 18. p98
- 19. p176
- 20. p252
- 21. Ibid
- 22. p253
- 23. p71

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