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**The Notion of Religion and Religiosity: A Study of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***

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**ABSTRACT**

*The White Tiger* is the debut novel of Aravind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and won the Man Booker Prize in the same year. The Man Booker Prize made Adiga famous instantly and he got abundant response everywhere. This novel portrays the contrast between India's rise as a modern global super-power and a humiliating rural poverty from where the central character of the novel Balram Halwai belongs. Here, Adiga explores some grim facet of Indian life and the novel is a trenchant critique of contemporary India. It bypasses the superlatives of the economic boom to tell the story of an India that is savage and dark. This paper is an attempt to analyze the novel with particular focus on the notion of religion which exposes the decline of religious values in all spheres of life due to advancement of modern civilization in India.

Key Words: *Religion, Poverty, Dark, Savage, White Tiger*

Literature is known to have changed the direction of the human mind and set in motion actions that have altered our ways of life. The impact of literature on society is felt directly or indirectly. Many of the modern authors have approached literature from the perspectives of economic, ethical, sociological, political, religious or educational question; and thus literature proves to be the most effective tool to deliver their socialistic agenda. *The White Tiger* is the debut novel of author Aravind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and won the Man Booker Prize in the same year. Other works of Aravind Adiga includes *Between the Assassinations* (2008) and *Last Man in Tower* (2011). Aravind Adiga was born in Madras (now called Chennai) in 1974 and has subsequently lived in India, Australia, the U.S. and the U.K. The

novel provides a sinisterly humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village lad who journeys from the darkness of village life to the light of entrepreneurial success in an utterly amoral, radiantly irreverent, deeply engaging and altogether unforgettable mode. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is compendium of religious ferment. The novel portrays the real picture of Indian society including problem of caste and class, poor and politics. The novel exposes decline of religious values from all sphere of life. In the novel Adiga is not just discarding religious values and its significance but he is presenting them in sardonic terms.

*The White Tiger* is an epistolary novel. It was written at the stretch of seven nights to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. It is the story of an enslavement, rebelling spirit and assassination. The novel is written in the first-person narration, Balram Halwai, the protagonist. His tone is witty and sarcastic. Through his journey, he brings the narrator from the darkness to light. Balram wanted to write a letter in response to what he heard in a radio; Mr. Jiabao was on a mission to India. The narrator and the protagonist, Balram Halwai came from Laxmangarh, located in the rural state of Bihar. He was a son of a rickshaw puller. Though an intelligent and a hopeful child he is forced to leave the school early and work in a tea stall. Even the driving lessons he took as a side job so that it will be useful to him later and can earn more money. Eventually, with his luck he gets to meet rich landlord it was 'The Stork' who gave him the chauffeur job to drive for his son Mr. Ashok who just came back from the US. At present, they are staying in Gurgaon, New Delhi. Often, he would drive Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky madam to shopping malls and with this Balram got to see the glimmering side of India. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is compilation of religious commotion. The novel exposes decline of religious values from all spheres of life in derogatory and blasphemies ways. In the novel Adiga is not just discarding religious values and its significance but he is presenting them in sarcastic terms. The gradual decline of religious values, faith, and moralities were asserted by poet W.B. Yeats in his well-known poem *The Second Coming* which was echoed by Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe in "Things Fall Apart" (1958), *Things fall Apart, the Centre cannot hold, Mere Anarchy is loosed upon the world* (Yeats 121). This announcement made by W.B. Yeats was indication that old values; morality and being religious and religiosity which were based on truth and religion but were designed to dupe mass, was understood by the healthy pattern of social norms as fake and were on the way of disappearance. He wrote the dark side of India. He spoke for the proletariat.

When people questioned him as to why his book only talks about the dark side of India. He explained to them saying that he is very much influenced by work of writers like Flaubert Balzac and Dickens of 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He says that their criticism has helped England to become better societies and he expects the same result from our country.

The notion of religion as it has been defined and presented in Indian society has been understood by Adiga thoroughly. He seems to be aware of its merits and demerits both. His vision of religion is much more influenced by the modern globalized world with scientific progress and advancement. Again narrative of religion exposes strong impudent notions for all religion of Indian society and questions their relevancy in post-colonial India. *It is an ancient and venerated custom of people in my country to start a story by praying to a Higher Power. I guess, your Excellency, which I too should start off by kissing some god's arse. Which god's arse, though? There are so many choice. See, the Muslims have one god. The Christians have three gods. And we Hindus have 36,000,000 gods. Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divide arse for me to choose from*(Adiga 8). This quote reveals the use of literary devices. The author Aravind Adiga uses irony, satire, and allusions while criticizing the Indian society. He wanted to convey the reader that his people are stupid and innocent to idolize such ancient customs. Also, when Aravind Adiga talked about 'Higher Power'. He uses the literary device of allusion. Through this, he wanted to tell the readers that Indians cannot live in freedom because they always want some higher authority to suppress them. Even though Arvind Adiga uses these devices clearly to condemn the Indian society but he was not able to realize that people would never like that his/her own religion is insulted in this way, even though his intentions may be for the benefit of people. However, there are a large number of people who would have the same opinion with Aravind Adiga that this superior control of power by the ruling class not only in India but in all parts of the world, tries to use religion as an excuse to keep poor people as slaves and poor workers and labourers. This is probably secular views of Adiga that he does not talk of One God from one religious community but all gods of all religious communities who reside in India. Talking of one will lead to conflict with other i.e..he mentioned all without assuming one as superior. The narrator of the novel is scornful in his approach to religion when he compares these gods of darkness with our politicians who are doing nothing but wining election year after year. India is such a country where the omnipresence of supreme authority cannot be denied entirely. The fundamental facts of religion which includes beliefs, sacredness, moralities,

honesty and values have been taught to humanity with inception of civilization. The origin of the entire river in India has religious associations. For example, the river Ganga, river of radiance, breaker of the chain of birth and re-birth. Millions of devotee each year dip in the holy water of this sacred river. It is believed that if one wash in the holy water of Ganga all sins will get eroded at the very moment. White Tiger alias Balram suggests: *No!—Mr. Jaibo I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of fasces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acid*(Adiga 15). It is ancient tradition of Hindu that death bodies are often cremated on the bank of river. Balram, at the time of his mother's death is in Varanasi and reflects as: *We walk past temple after temple, praying to god after god, and then went in a single file between a red temple devoted to Hanuman and an open gymnasium where threebody builders heaved rested weights over their heads. I smelled to river before I saw it: a stench of decaying flesh rising from any right. I slang louder: '... the only truth'*(Adiga 16).

The grips of religion, its faith, fidelity and devotion are too strong in laymen that for each serious thing they seem to be restless to take oath of god. The religious bias, animosity and contempt between Hindu and Muslim community is so much that even a Hindu man like Stork wants his that his grandson should not call himself Azaharuddin, the captain of Indian cricket team. Stork grandson says, *I am Azzharuddin, the captain of India! The boy shouted every time he hit a six or a four. Call yourself Gavaskar. Azaharuddin is a Muslim* (Adiga 69-70). The animosity between one religious group to other is too much that even man like Ram Prasad had to hid his caste and religion to get job of driver. Being a Muslim he has to pray before Hindu god and has to say *Om, om, om* (Adiga 77). When his identity is revealed, he has to leave his job without saying a single word. The second servant Balram who is a man of action and wisdom is pretending to be a man of religion. He brought two dozen of the cheapest idols of Hanuman and Ram which he could find. He touches his nose by his finger while driving his master's car back from Laxamganj, not just in one place but all the way whichever temple or sacred tree like banyan comes in his way he used to bow his head in respect and touch his eyes and even nipples with his fingers. The decline and degeneration of religious values and its significance is visible when the victory of great socialist is announced. On the one hand priests are celebrating a special 'Pooja' to pray for the great socialist's victory on the occasion *Mutton Biryani was distributed on the paper plates in the front of the temple and in the evening there was free booze for all* (Adiga

100). The driver Balram who everyday wipes the three magnetic stickers with the images of the mother-goddess Kali, prays for the good and bad to other. The god is supposed to be with human beings who are basically doing well, but Balram when he is doing unethical things prays to the goddess Kali for her assistance. At the same time, he wants to remove the picture of Kali: *I yawned, closed my eyes, and slithered down my seat. With one eye open, I looked at the magnetic sticker of the goddess Kali- who is a very fierce black-skinned goddess, holding a scimitar, and a garland of skulls. I made a note to myself to change that sticker. She looked too much like Granny* (Adiga 135). Even the legal system too has the faith in religious oath when a baby is crushed under the tire of 'Honda City' (Car) which was being driven by Pinky Madam, Balram is tactically forced to sign a well confessed document which says, *I swear by almighty God I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one* (Adiga 168). Mr. Ashok marries a girl who is from outside his caste, religious community and even country. When she left Mr. Ashok and returned to her country Mr. Ashok repents and emphasizes on the values of religion and castes that exists in Indian society. *Of course, in your caste you don't...Let me tell you, Balram. Men drink because they are sick of life. I thought caste and religion didn't matter any longer in today's world. My father said, "No, don't marry her, she's of another...I..."* (Adiga 186). It is well known fact that God is earnestly remembered in crisis, disappointment, sorrow, and suffering. Mr. Ashok is disappointed due to the divorce of his wife. He is thinking of life and death *sometime I wonder Balram, I wonder what the point of living is. I really wonder* (Adiga 186). Balram is trying to pacify him ridiculously not because whatever he is suggesting is based on truth but because he is receiving three and half thousand per month so if his master will not live how he will get his payment: *You must believe in God, sir you must go on. My granny says that if you believe in God, the good things will happen. "That is true, it is true. We must believe," he sobbed. "Once there was a man who stopped believing in God, and you know what happened?" "What?" "His buffalo died at once." "I see." He laughed. "I see." "Yes, sir, it really happened. The next day he said, "God I'm sorry, I believe in you," and guess what happened?" "His buffalo came back to life?" "Exactly!"* (Adiga 186). There is an event in the *Bhagavad Gita*, when our lord Krishna- another of history's famous chauffeurs- stops the chariot he is driving and gives his passenger some excellent advice on life and death (Adiga 187). Just like Krishna, Balram is philosophizing to make his master realize better. This indicates that myths from religious sermon not only gives peace and consolation to humanity in their miserable condition

but are the best guide line to lead a happy prosperous and religious life with moralities and human values.

The novel gives detailed account of the Indian society—rural as well as urban. It portrays poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and cultural conflict, superstition, dowry practice, economic disparity, zamindari system, and exploitation of marginal farmers and landless labourers, corrupt education system, poor health services, tax evading rackets, disillusioned master-servant relationship, prostitution, weakening family structure, entrepreneurial success and its fall out etc. in various parts of India. Laxmangarh , Gaya, Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore constitute the basic structure of Indian society which largely forms the dark image of India. Adiga has successfully highlighted the subaltern issue in the novel by consecrating the rhetoric of the underclass. P. Usha Rani coerces that in Adiga's novel the *voice of the narrator is sometimes cynical, amoral, and it raises questions regarding the vices like corruption in the overall set up of economic scene of the country*(Usha 133). The voice of the underclass is strongly articulated and he attempts to give them proper recognition in the society. By exploring social, economic and political injustice spread in a democratic country like India, Adiga interrogates people, the political parties and the government who are responsible for this situation. He emphasizes the importance of redistribution and need to reward the underprivileged adequately for their work. Situation can improve only with the empowerment of the working masses. Adiga's irritation may be justified, but it is not the total truth about a vast country like India that has a long colonial history, tolerance and capacity of detached observation. Vandana Pathak is right in her observation: *At a time when India is going through great changes and with China likely to inherit the world from the west it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustice of society. That's what I am trying to do—it is not an attack on the country, it's about the great process of self-examination* (Pathak 67). The Amazon Review of *Publishers Weekly* in April 2008 aptly stated the crux of the novel: “[...] A brutal view of India's class struggles is cunningly presented in Adiga's debut [novel] about a racist [...] [and] homicidal chauffeur. Balram Halwai is from the *Darkness*, born where India's downtrodden and unlucky are destined to rot. Balram manages to escape his village and move to Delhi after being hired as a driver for a rich landlord. Telling his story in retrospect, the novel is a piecemeal correspondence from Balram to the premier of China, who is expected to visit India and whom

Balram believes could learn a lesson or two about India's entrepreneurial underbelly. Adiga's existential and crude prose animates the battle between India's wealthy and poor as Balram suffers degrading treatment at the hands of his employers (or, more appropriately, masters). [...] Halwai is a clever and resourceful narrator with a witty and sarcastic edge that endears him to readers, even as he rails about corruption, allows himself to be defiled by his bosses, spews coarse invective and eventually profits from moral ambiguity and outright criminality. It is the perfect antidote to lyrical India" (The Amazon Review).

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