

Indian Fiction in English
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Lecture – 29
White Tiger

Good morning, everyone. Today we are discussing this novel "The White Tiger" written by Aravind Adiga. As most of you may know this is the novel which received the Man Booker Prize in the year 2008 and in that this is also when, seen as one of those novels which brought the Booker event to the field of Indian Fiction in English. Nevertheless, it also needs to be told at this point that though this is Booker just like Rushdie's novel and just like Arundhati Roy's novel, this has not received the kind of critical attention that the other Bookered events have received.

And this is something very interesting, especially if you have a critical interest in looking at how the literary (()) (01:00) the critical tradition is, are being framed. And it will also be possible to notice that at some level, the critical interest and the acute kind of production of secondary material, as far as Indian Fiction in English is concerned, it is, it rests in this 18 year arc from Midnight's Children of 1981 till Arundhati Roy's, The God of Small Things.

And for some reason or the other, the novels which are Bookered after this, especially Adiga's, namely Adiga's White Tiger and Kiran Desai's, The Inheritance of Loss, they fail to make it to this league which is book ainted between Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. We shall not be going into the details of those questions. However, it will be interesting to ask those extra literary questions which will tell us a thing or two about how the literary tradition, how canon is formed, how historiography gets written, etc.

Of course, you would come across a few papers, seminar papers, essays and articles written about Adiga's work and many have also spoken about how he tries to bring back the discussion of caste into the oeuvre of Indian Fiction in English. And while Rushdie began to narrate the story of India, he began to retell the story of the nation from a different vantage point. Here we have a novel in Adiga's work, The White Tiger which is a tale of 2 Indias.

He talks about 2 different kinds of Indias and he talks about the protagonist Balram's journey from the darkness of village life to the light of entrepreneurial success. So at some level this is also the kind of themes which have not been looked into, which have not been taken into account as far as Indian Fiction in English is concerned. But we should not forget even for a minute that this is also the work which received lot of lack, lot of terrible reviews were written about this work.

Many were extremely unhappy that this kind of writing was awarded the Booker Prize and these would be rather interesting to take a look at if, when you take a detail look at this work and the, the protagonist unlike the other protagonist in most of the leading less Indian English Novels, it is Balram Halwai, who is an ordinary man, who is an ordinary man who, it is a story of someone who rises from rags to riches.

It is the story of a man who is not caught within the subject who look secular self as we see in most of the other leading Indian novels in English and this is again another interesting factor. We will be able to bring in a lot of interesting insights into the reading of this work we find the interplay of class and caste. Over here, we find the dichotomy of the rural and the urban bringing in interesting, showcasing interesting tales and interesting insights.

We also find that this is at some level also about life in post-independent India. It is also about the ordinary life. It is also about the extraordinary things that happen in an ordinary life in post-independent India. If you ask this question whether or not this narrates the nation in some way or the other, I just leave the question open for you to engage with it. This does deal with the nation. This does deal with the lived realities, the lived experiences within the nation but the take is entirely different as you would begin to see.

It is not an approach which looks at a mega-canvas like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. This has a more localized flavour to it. It has human and even a dehumanized side to it. This, one is not too sure about the processions that the novel advocates. It is also about the new India which has opened up newer possibilities, the new, new India which continues to fight with the many realities and the many limitations of caste, the limiting factors

of class, the, the, the constraints of gender but it is also the new India which would enable someone to crossover these barriers.

How much of this can be taken for face value and how much of this needs to be stained and this was yet another question that perhaps that we need to discuss. This is fantastic review that Pankaj Mishra wrote about Adiga's novel. I, I retell this also had made its way into the blocks of most of the additions of this work, "With remorselessly and delightfully mordant wit, *The White Tiger* anatomises the fantastic cravings of the rich; it evokes, too, with startling accuracy and tenderness, the no less desperate struggles of the deprived."

So this is a novel in which we find the lives of the rich, the lives of the poor, the lives of the haves and have not is getting intertwined in particular ways and it is, one thing that I really like about the telling of this novel is that it is very non-judgemental. And we may have different opinions about the critical merit or the critical aspirations of this work, how this lends itself to certain frameworks of post-colonial theory.

That apart, the work tries to be pretty much non-judgemental in its approach and Balram Halwai, the central protagonist of this work, he is enduring and it is, he also begins to frighten us, the possibilities that he begins to use and misuse, that also begins to frighten us in certain ways. Since we began talking about Rushdie in this course and we keep referring to him every now and then during the discussions of various other novels and writers and context.

It will be appropriate to mention the, the mentioning of Rushdie's work, the illusion, the depictual illusion in reference to Rushdie's work in another one of Adiga's work, Adiga had also written a short-story collection titled *Between the Assassinations*. This is set of stories which book-in between 2 major assassinations that modern India, or the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the assassination of Rajeev Gandhi.

So this is set of narratives which tells about certain experiences of particularly a non-middle class, another background and I read to you this interesting remark about Rushdie's work from one of this, one of the short-stories in this collection. It comes towards the end of this particular

short-story which is titled Day 2 Afternoon in Lighthouse (()) (08:10).

And the last sentence about certain character, a boy named, who, who comes to be known as Xerox. And this is how the last line of the short-story reads. "The book was banned throughout The Republic of India and it was the only thing that Xerox entered there to sell that day, The Satanic-verses by Salman Rushdie." I find this illusion extremely useful and enduring.

And it is also one way in which of the young writers who also claims this, who also claims its legitimacy through the writings of Rushdie, gives a tribute to this ancestor, the literary ancestor of his, Salman Rushdie. To this, I also leave you to the, the your reading of this work and hope you would be able to come up with very good interesting observations which would place this novel in particular ways within the literary tradition and as well as within the larger frame of Indian Writing in English.

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The White Tiger

Aravind Adiga

So The White Tiger, it was published in 2009 and Aravind Adiga got the Booker for it. I think it almost sold 200,000 copies that was the reason as to why it, I am not sure like now.

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The Author

Aravind Adiga

Born 1974 in Chennai

Studied abroad- Australia, New York, Oxford

Now lives in Mumbai

So Adiga was born in Chennai in 1974 and I think he belonged to, he belonged to the family which was pretty successful, went, studied abroad, first Australia. He studied agriculture there. In New York, he entered into more creative field. Oxford, he also did, I think, he studied English literature and I think his mentor was Hermione Lee which, who was one well known critic.

And then, I think, he worked with the Times as a freelance journalist and, and so Financial, I think, Financial Times, yes. And during his extent as a freelance writer, he wrote The White Tiger which he received, you know, the, the Booker and now he lives in Mumbai. So I will talk about the novel.

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The Novel

A bildungsroman.

Autobiographical fiction.

The the national zeitgeist glimpsed through the eyes of a working class man.

Heavy with irony and sarcasm.

Divided into a series addressed to the Chinese premier.

The novel is a like bildungsroman of the protagonist and the narrator, Balram Halwai and it is an autobiographical fiction. He has written in the first person and the character of Balram Halwai is a, he belongs to the poor class, the, in the rural India in Uttar Pradesh and his journey towards the city and his experiences. So his is more of narration of, you know, his experience of living in India and, you know, various perspectives, you know, Marxist, casteist and as a working class man.

The tone of the novel is full of irony and sarcasm. The writing is funny in lot of instances. I remember once where his employer, Mr. Ashok is in a moment of crisis and he says what is the point of living and Balram is thinking to himself if the point of you all living is then who will give me my Rs. 3000 as a monthly salary.

The novel is actually a series of, you know, what do you call it emails or letters addressed to the Chinese premier, the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao and he keeps referencing, the narrator keep referring it to the premier's visit to India, I think, in 2005 or 2006 which was to resolve the border issue. I will talk about more about the novel. One of the theme is obviously globalization.

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Global India

Position in the global world.

Growing IT and service sector.

Impact on the social dynamics.

This, the novel comes on 27 years after Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was published and national identity, I mean, the book itself is about the nation, I mean, as the lot of popular books are, especially the Booker ones. So you have an evolved, what do you say, a, the evolved

explanation of how India has progressed, you know, in the last, last few decades, the contemporary times, the position in the global world, they keep, they keep comparing India to the other countries as of the West and especially China.

The China effect is like how it is going ahead of India and you know, how India is lagging behind, plus the growing IT and service sectors, sector which like the recent boom led during the 2000, how it impacted the social dynamics, the economics and the politics of the country. So the protagonist is the narrator, first person.

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The Essential Character: Balram Halwai

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an odd museum of ideas [...] – all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with.

So he belongs, he comes, he is born in a small village called Laxmangarh which is a few, few miles away from Gaya and he is born over there, he, he, he spends his teen in Dhanbad, working in tea shops and then later he comes into contact with one of the landlords in Dhanbad and he is taken into service and then later he moves on to Delhi. So about the character like he describes himself as one of the thousands in the country who are half-baked, never completed their education, have formed the ideas half digested and half correct.

He thinks that, you know, the accumulation of semen in the lower body can lead to mental problems and cell phones are bad for the, gives you brain cancer and all that. Half-formed ideas and, you know, superstitions of all kinds. But he considers himself as, like, in the beginning of the novel he declares himself as a one of the great man.

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My father sat panting against the mural of the Lord Buddha surrounded by the gentle animals.
When he caught his breath, he said, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine—at least one—should live like a man".

- Servant to "a self taught entrepreneur". Considers himself a great man.
- Criticised as a re-Orientalized character with an inauthentic voice.

And a self-taught entrepreneur later and he has always had this peak of rebelliousness within him for the sake of resistance towards the system, like his father is a rickshaw puller and face the hardship of life. So in, in, in a moment between the father and son, his father sat panting against the mural of Lord Buddha surrounded by gentle animals when he caught his breath, My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey.

All I want is that one son of mine - at least one - should live like a man. And when later, I think, Balram has living in Delhi, he, when, when, when his family is sending him letters, they talk about marriage. He does not want to commit to it because he compares himself to a cow pulling, cow pulling a cart with, you know, rubble and there, like, sorry, he compares himself with donkey and his progeny, you know, to younger donkeys who also will cart heavy loads for the masters. So he does not want to propagate that. One other themes is India of the Dark.

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India of the Dark

Which black river am I talking of—which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it?

Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness.

No!—Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids.

So, when he is young, his mother dies and in the novel in the novel, it is, like, it is kind of subtly planted that his grandmother had something to do with the death of his mother and when he sees his mother's body burning on the banks of Ganga, he has this fainting fit and his, his perspective of what, what we call the rural India is imprinted here which black river am I talking of, the river of Death whose bank is full of rich, dark sticky mud, whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it.

Everywhere this river flows, the area has darkness. Addressing Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straws, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids. And this imagery actually is something unique about Adiga and I think it is a lot of influence from Mulkraj Anand basically, you know. The imagery of, you know, how terrible it is to live there.

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India of the Light

In his journey from village to city, from Laxmangarh to Delhi, the entrepreneur's path crosses any number of provincial towns that have the pollution and noise and traffic of a big city— without any hint of the true city's sense of history, planning, and grandeur. Half-baked cities, built for half-baked men.

-Is India really shining?

In Dhanbad, he, he meets a landlord, stock is, it is actually metaphorical kind of reference because stock stays on the rivers, he is also born in Laxmangarh but he went to America and he has come back now. So there are elections coming up in UP and so there is a lot of activity going on. And Ashok along with his wife and the driver. So Balram is had as a driver and they go to Delhi and over there, the story progresses further. So when Balram moves to the city, it is, it is a totally different experience for him.

He is lost in Delhi. He does not know the roads. He does not know how they live. It is, it is a, it is a revealing movement for him. And the journey from the village to city, from Laxmangarh to Delhi, the entrepreneur path crosses any number of provincial towns that have been, that are the pollution and the noise of the traffic of a big city, without any hint of the true city's sense of history, planning, and grandeur.

Half-baked cities, built for half-baked men. It basically talks about tire-3 cities, I think. But when the opposite the India of the Light versus the India of the Darkness, you are really talking with urban and the rural divide that is like the periphery and the fringes, sorry, periphery and the core. What Adiga actually does very nicely is he holds a mirror up to, you know, the India of the Light and is it really shining.

I mean, he, he gives the images of slums, footpath dwellers and then the corruption that happens

in the city, especially the politicians, the middle man and then the, there is this one incident where the couple that is Mr. Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam, they go to a mall and, so the mall is a glittery place full of shopping centers and, you know, bars and restaurants but the poor man's mall is right besides the real mall which is the street. It is an alley full of tea shops and, you know, cigarette shops stuff these (()) (20:52) , where they get wadas for like Rs.10, cigarettes, where they go and have chill basically.

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Master/Slave

To sum up—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.

Now, I say they took me on as their "driver." I don't exactly know how you organize your servants in China. But in India—or, at least, in the Darkness—the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants.

These days, there are just 2 castes, Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies. Obviously like I say that they took me on as their driver. I do not know how you organize your servants in China. So this divide is actually like personally for them, for Balram, it is between him and his employer, Mr. Ashok. There he learns from his master. He gets the salary. He even digests his master because they learn from each other. He, he has this kind of an, even you could say an infatuation with his employer, Mr. Ashok.

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The Rooster Coop

"The Rooster Coop was doing its work. Servants have to keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters or entrepreneurs."

-The white tiger: a freak of nature

The Rooster Coop, the Rooster Coop is something figurative which is mentioned several times by the narrator. It is, it is the way of organizing Indian society where hens are kept and whenever they are needed, the jam packed terrible conditions and whenever they are needed, they will just pull them out and cut their necks off. The Rooster Coop was doing it work. Servants have to keep other servants from being innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs.

In Delhi when he is driving, sometime you as the title character, he is, he is kind of resistant person, Balram Halwai. So he experiments with yoga, reading, all kinds of. And the other servants, they think his attempts to these are really, you know, superficial, you know, unnecessary. But like that is what he talks about the hatred between the poor, between themselves, that is what keep them, keeps them disintegrated, disunited and keep them always, you know, under the masters.

It is actually, I have read another book Behind the Beautiful Forevers by Katherine Boo and then you have David Gregory Roberts' Shantaram which have the same themes where, you know, why, why are the poor in India always poor. I mean, why cannot they improve. So this is one of the things which have been repeated again and again. But as you know our protagonist is The White Tiger. So White Tiger is a freak of nature and only a freak of nature can escape The Rooster Coop.

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Mr. Premier,

Sir.

Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.

This is actually the first address to the premier of China. Going into the same lines that what Rushdie did when he talked about, you know, parochialism in the Bhashas and how English is the only language which can be used for, you know, national narrative.

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Comparison to Rushdie

"on the fifteenth of August, 1947 – the day the British left – the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law" -Adiga

"how fine was the manner of its [the imperial sun's] setting; in what good order the British withdrew. Union Jacks fluttered down their poles all round the world, to be replaced by other flags, in all manner of outlandish colours. The pink conquerors crept home, the box wallahs and memsahibs and bwanas, leaving behind them parliaments, schools, Grand Trunk Roads and the rules of cricket." -Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands

But there are, I think, sharp differences between Rushdie and, you know, Adiga. So in one of the, in one of the descriptions of what happened in India on the 15th of August, the day the British left, the cages had been left open and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and the jungle law replaced zoo law. So you have Adiga on one hand telling with it was complete chaos but in Imaginary Homelands, Rushdie says how fine was the manner of its, the imperial sun's, setting.

In what good order the British withdrew. Union Jacks fluttered down their poles all round the world to be replaced by other flags, in all manner of outlandish colours. The pink conquerors crept home, the box wallahs and memsahibs and bwanas, leaving behind the parliaments, schools, Grand Trunk Roads and the rules of cricket. In one of the reviewers says that Adiga could be classified as the anti-Rushdie.

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"Adiga could be classified as the anti-Rushdie, cleansing florid exotica from the fiction of India". -Boyd Tonkin, The Independent

-Comparison to Mulk Raj Anand "the Charles Dickens of India"

How India as a, especially in Indian English writing, is sold as a product to the West as an exotic thing and you can say even Adiga is doing the same thing but it is, it is a more realistic, more contemporary, more modern portrayal of India. Even though, it is how certain writers have, certain critics have criticised Adiga for this, the authenticity of his voice.

Comparing to Mulkraj Anand, the Charles Dickens of India. So if you have read the Cooley or even The Untouchable, Mulkraj Anand actually makes a lot of description about the living conditions of India and I think Adiga has kind of borrowed the same style from him, especially the imagery of, you know, the poor, the, the dirty, the raw life of India. The Anxiety of Indianness.

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Anxiety Of Indianness

-How to write Indian Fiction?

-Prescribed set of markers?

"... fame abroad will be on the basis of their relationship with India and whether they can find new modes of representing the complex realities of their culture."

"There is no getting away from the the burden of India if you want to write in english."

So Adiga is obviously comes, he was born in Chennai but he went abroad, studied there and I believe, obviously he believes, belongs to the elites of writers who are not situated in India and still write about India. So there is always, there will be critics who will question his authenticity, how can you write a portrayal unless he has lived it, unless he has not lived it.

Are there, are there any set of markers of Indianness which you can include in the novel which, which will make that narrative authentic. Meenakshi Mukherjee at least talk about this fame abroad will be on the basis of their relationship with India and whether they can find new modes of representing the complex realities of their culture. There is no getting away from the burden of India if you want to write in English.

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Cult of Authenticity

"Anxiety about the anxiety of Indianness"

Vikram Chandra on the rhetoric of authenticity-"A lot of Indo-Anglian writers live abroad, so they are disconnected from Indian realities, and are prey to nostalgia; and besides, the bastards are too comfortable over there and don't have to face Delhi traffic jams and power cuts and queues for phones and train tickets and busses, and so they don't suffer like us and so they can't possibly be virtuous enough to be good artists."

In response to this, another critic Vikram Chandra, he call this the Cult of Authenticity, the anxiety about the Anxiety of Indianness. The people who question the authenticity of these novels are disregarding the art and basically they are the gatekeepers, the (()) (27:55) of what is this real India you are talking about. Is there a standard to be judged, I mean, is it really necessary.

He directly attacks this with his, one of his, like what he says about the rhetoric of authenticity. A lot of Indo-Anglian writers live abroad. So they are disconnected from Indian realities and they are prey to nostalgia and besides the bastards are too comfortable over there and do not have to face Delhi traffic jams and power cuts and queues for phones and train tickets and busses.

So they do not suffer like us and so they cannot possibly be virtuous enough, virtuous enough to be good artists. So if you are not living here, how can you write about India, that is what point is. But obviously Vikram says it opposing that, you know.