



ISSN Print: 2664-8717
ISSN Online: 2664-8725
Impact Factor: RJIF 8.00
IJRE 2024; 6(2): 01-03
www.englishjournal.net
Received: 02-04-2024
Accepted: 06-05-2024

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Ethics and entrepreneurship in the white Tiger: Exploring the moral ambiguities of Balram's success

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i2a.194>

Abstract

Arvind Adiga's 'The White Tiger' is a vivid portrayal of contemporary Indian society. Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel rises up the social - strata defying all the norms and raves the challenges that punctuate his journey. The paper probes the intersection of ethics and entrepreneurship as illustrated in the novel. It analyzes Balram's entrepreneurial journey marked by his moral quandaries within the context of socio economic disparity and systemic corruption. Through the close reading of the text this paper investigates the ethical dilemmas confronted by Balram and their moral implications. The analysis illuminates the reader on the ethical challenges intrinsic to entrepreneurial success in a post-colonial period. This study highlights the broader implications of Balram's journey by understanding the age old rich- poor divide and a no man's pursuit of success in this highly stratified society. The study aims to contribute to the business and literature by initiating discussions on means versus ends and the reader's perception of it.

Keywords: Contemporary Indian society, ethics and entrepreneurship, socio-economic disparity, systemic corruption, moral quandaries

Introduction

The 21st century, an era of economic boom has not only opened the floodgates to economic prosperity but also drowned the modern man into it. The sea of innumerable opportunities does not allow them to have a gasp of thoughtful moments to steer the ship of their lives in the upright direction. The pursuit of becoming successful has consumed the modern society so much that they often end up sacrificing the means.

Arvind Adiga's novel 'The White Tiger' set against the backdrop of modernizing India delineates the life of an entrepreneurial success Balram Halwai. Balram Halwai is the representative of the modern man who very easily succumbs to the temptation of becoming successful at the end no matter what.

The novel is critical of the socio economic condition that furthers such ethical considerations. The writer highlights the systemic incongruencies and moral compromises that are suppressed in the dazzling light of entrepreneurial success. The honest and bitter portrayal of the ethical challenges urges the readers to consider the moral implications of economic survival and advancement.

This paper investigates the ethical challenges of entrepreneurship within the context of socioeconomic inequalities and systemic corruption. The close textual analysis involves the In-death character study of Balram Halwai focusing on his background, education, aspirations, moral compromises, corruption, his transformation, final reflection and self-justification supported by the relevant quotes from the text itself.

By presenting ethical challenges in the critical light, this paper contributes to the broader discourses on the role of ethics in business and literature. Ultimately, this study seeks to unravel the ways in which literature can be utilized for understanding the relationship between economic achievement and ethical conduct in a stratified society.

Discussion

'The White Tiger', a Thinking man and an Entrepreneur (Adiga 3) addresses a letter to the president of China on his impending visit to Bangalore.

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Sharing his own experience of entrepreneurship- “how it is fostered, how it overcomes hardships, how it remains steadfast to its true goals, and how it is rewarded with the gold medal of success.” (Adiga 317).

The success story of this White Tiger alias Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the Man Booker Prize (2008) winner novel ‘The White Tiger’ by Arvind Adiga, is an incredible one. The journey that ends becoming the White Tiger begins with acquiring this title. An inspector paid a surprise visit to Balram’s local school which was devoid of all the basic amenities. In the midst of such an environment crowded with the students that one can expect, the inspector found Balram “an intelligent, honest and vivacious follower like a creature that comes along only once in a generation.” (Adiga 35). Balram could not finish his school but it in no way jeopardized his future:

“I never finished school, who cares! I haven't read many books, but I've read all the ones that count. I am a self-taught entrepreneur. That's the best kind there is, trust me.” (Adiga 6)

Being born to a poor rickshaw puller father in the India of darkness - India of the poor- a small village of Laxmangarh in the district of Gaya shaped Balram’s perception of society early in life. His typical Indian village lacking the fundamental facilities with equally lacking healthy populace is evident in the following lines:

“Electricity poles - defunct Water tap - broken

Children- too lean and short for their age and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India.” (Adiga 20)

The bell of poverty rings in every house of the village. ‘The water buffalo’ is introduced as the most important member of the family owing to the money that one gets by selling its milk. The doorway is occupied by this ‘most important family member’ while the rest of the members including aunts, uncles, cousins and granny Kusum somehow arrange themselves in two corners - one for men another for women. Such family set ups cherish the virtues of ‘absolute fidelity, love and devotion’ by devoting themselves to the worship of ‘Hanuman’ - the faithful servant of the god Rama - to show the example of how to serve your master.

To free oneself of such deeply instilled servitude requires grit and determination

Nonetheless, Balram somehow finds his ambition. The seeds of ambition were sown by his own father, Vikram Halwai who could have worked with his uncles at the landlord’s fields but he chose not to. He decided to fight, became a rickshaw puller and dreamed of making one of his sons, Balram, a man. He says, “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.” (Adiga 30)

Balram nursing the dream of his father in the oppressive atmosphere of Laxmangarh village, torn with the battles of four landlords namely - The Buffalo, ‘The Stork’, ‘The Wild Boar’ and ‘The Raven’ finds his first inspiration in Vijay, the bus conductor. People admired him a lot for what he had done with his life. Young Balram wanted to be like Vijay:

“I wanted to be like Vijay - with a uniform, a pay cheque, a shiny whistle with a piercing sound, how important it looks.” (Adiga 31)

However, Balram’s destiny was following a predestined path - meant for the people living in darkness - was taken out of the school. He had to work as a coal breaker at a tea shop so that he could help his family members to pay off the loan they had taken from the Stork. The coal breaker’s job could not break the undying spirit of Balram. He came to Dhanbad after his father’s death. The inability of the family to get his father treated at some good hospital; the corruption at the hospital; his painfully learnt lesson of dishonesty at the tea shop; his decision not to remain a ‘human spider’ (workers at tea shop) added fuel to the fire of desire to break from the predestined path. To become a taxi driver was a huge leap forward in his journey to become a social entrepreneur.

Balram was elated to be a driver at the Stork’s family in Dhanbad. The following lines express his contentment with his newly found job of a driver - driver with ‘A uniform - A Khaki Uniform’

“There was always enough food in the house for the servants. On Sundays you even got a special dish, rice mixed with small red chunks of boneless chicken. I had never had a regular chicken dish in my life and until then. I had got a covered room to sleep in.” (Adiga 67)

However, his happiness turned into envy on becoming a no. 2 driver. His attempts to be no. 1 driver became successful when he could dig out the deep, hidden secret of Ram Prasad’s (the driver) caste of being a Muslim. Step by step Balram was going up the ladder.

He absorbed everything - “that is an amazing thing about entrepreneurs. We are like sponges - we observe and grow.” (Adiga 71)

The conversations of masters - Mr. Mukesh, Mr. Ashok and the stork about politics, coal and China being eavesdropped by Balram were shaping up the ethical framework of his mind. He observed the servility of his own masters in front of another big master - the Great Socialist, the political leader from the darkness who despite having ‘a total of 93 criminal cases’ on his name managed to register a win for himself; analyzed his master’s plan to find a fixer in Delhi to settle their income tax scam and his in person witnessing of the big political echelons of Delhi normalized the concept of corruption for him. He starts believing that moral compromises are inherent in the journey to the top and further to survive at the top.

The peripheral acceptance of moral corruption had not entered into the center of Balram’s belief system until he was forced to own the blame of a murder committed by Pinky Madam, wife of his master Mr. Ashok. Now, after this incident, he found himself questioning his own existence - existence of servitude, where - in the ‘Great Indian Rooster Coop’- why- the family: “Only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed - hunted, beaten and burned alive by the masters - can break out the Coop.” (Adiga 176)

His answer was sorrowful. “He corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness.” (Adiga 197) He cheated his master and did what other city drivers were doing like siphoning his master’s petrol, taking the car to a corrupt mechanic etc. Instead of guilt, he felt rage against his master.

Balram’s internal conflict was rising. The sirens of the coop were ringing. Every petty thing as small as a fruit bag, small

puddles of water on the road, or the dense pollution of Delhi were like the ring masters of the psychological ring and commanding him to go on. The evil thoughts of slaying his master were not leaving his side. The implications of this ultimate ethical breach were parading through his mind; was panicked to think of his aunt being raped and beaten to death; grandmother kicked to death and brother Kishan beaten to death.

Somehow, the innocent village boy in him, subdued his wicked thoughts and convinced him to look for a tender moment with Mr. Ashok where he could confess everything but it did not happen. Ultimately, he murdered his master and broke from the literal and metaphorical constraints imposed upon him. Having broken 'the coop' he ran to Bangalore, took time to observe and analyze what could work in this city. Finally, Balram becomes a 'Business entrepreneur from a Social entrepreneur'; adopts a new identity - Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur settled in Bangalore. (Adiga 302)

This new Balram the owner of 'The White Tiger Driver Company' is proud of his suvs, drivers, garages, mechanics and paid off policemen unlike his previous masters. This ethically upright master does not treat his drivers like servants. He does not slap, bully or mock anyone like his former masters. When one of his drivers hit a man on his bicycle; didn't reproach him; rather owned the responsibility of his death to himself; visited the dead man's house; offered them compensation and asked for forgiveness:

"The fault is mine. Not the driver's. The police have let me off. That is the way of this Jungle we live in. But I accept my responsibility. I ask for your forgiveness. There are twenty five thousand rupees in here. I don't give it to you because I have to, but because I want to. Do you understand?" (Adiga 312)

This transformation post - murder is like a self-justification. He had been a victim and perpetrator both. He believes in breaking - 'turning bad news into good news':

"To break the law of his land - to turn bad news into good news - is the entrepreneur's prerogative." (Adiga 30)

Now Balram seeks to reshape his ethical boundaries - new entrepreneurial ethical system:

"But I had to do something different; don't you see? I can't live the way The Wild Boar and the Buffalo and the Raven lived, and probably still live, back in Laxmangarh. I am in the light now." (Adiga 313)

Having switched sides and making it to the 'India of light'. Balram wishes to contribute to the socio - economic conditions of the 'India of Darkness'. He wants the poor to start their own revolution for freedom from poverty without 'waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else':

"The book of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly. Young Indian, crap it out and read." (Adiga 304)

Though Balram was out of the 'coop' yet he knew anything could happen to him anytime 'getting caught - it's always a possibility'. Even this acceptance of his uncertain life does not deter him from planning for his future - not self-oriented only but society oriented also. Look at the following lines:

"After three or four years in real estate, I might sell everything, take money and start a school - an English language school - for poor children in Bangalore. A school where you won't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with prayers or stories about God or Gandhi - nothing but the facts of the life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers,

unleashed on Bangalore!" (Adiga 319) - Balram's learning - laced plan.

The ambitious plans of Balram could be blown away by life in a moment however, his sense of achievement; his newly found ethical sense would not let him drown under the burden of the murder of his master whom he thought in reflection 'was not much of a master to be weeded out'. His self-justification lies in the lines below:

"But isn't it likely that everyone who counts in this world, including our Prime Minister (including you, Mr. Jiabao), has killed someone or the other to the way of their top?" (Adiga 318) Further he adds to it by saying:

"I'll say it was all worthwhile to know just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant." (Adiga 321)

Conclusion

Arvind Adiga brilliantly traces the journey of Balram Halwai from the 'India of Darkness' to the 'India of Light' shedding light on the modern complex issue of ethics and entrepreneurship. This analysis highlights the moments which mark Balram's transformation from a village boy to a City boy and the societal and individual factors that drive his actions.

Balram's early life at Laxmangarh unmasks the harsh realities of impoverishment and the implications of his low status in society kindling a fire of ambition to escape his predestined destiny. The taxi driver's job fuelled this fire despite the servility expected of him. The constant struggle between his desire and his low status can be noticed frequently. The ethical struggle culminates in the breach of a master's trust and his murder which is driven by his desire to break the coop and become a man not a servant. His post - murder transformation is informed by his own low status implications which allow him to recalibrate his ethical framework.

Through Balram's journey, 'The White Tiger' underscores the predicament of human beings being caught in the web of right and wrong struggling to secure success. The critical examination unravels the truth that the lines are often blurred. Adiga's novel calls for the need to reflect on one's actions and the ethical foundations of the modern pursuits, in specific, entrepreneurship and in general, any pursuance.

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