



Religion: A source of strengthening the “Rooster Coop” in arvind adiga’s *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, a dark social commentary, takes on religion in an extremely harsh manner. The tone of the writer is very sarcastic, sometimes unbearable. Throughout the novel we find the writer making fun of Hindu Gods and the religious sentiments of the people. Many critics reacted sharply to the attitude of the writer. Adiga, through Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the story, shocks the reader by his religious views. Adiga probably thinks the religion as an evil power which contributes in strengthening the “rooster coop” and making the man a slave of religious laws imposed by the age-old traditions. The writer perhaps wishes for a spiritual reorientation and a rationalism which can help the common man to get rid of the darkness of ignorance.

Keywords: hindu gods, cynical tone, mythological beliefs, age-old mentality, marxist attitude

Introduction

India is a country which believes in democratic values and remains a great example of religious diversity. The West is always curious to know more about the richness of Indian spirituality. The unity in diversity, the rich amalgamation of different cultures, religions, languages in India find the place in the heart of the world where materialistic tendencies weigh more than the traditional values. Adiga, perhaps, has no such perception. He, through his mouthpiece Balram, criticises the very base of Indian culture- the religion.

Balram finds it disgusting to see that all the important adventures in India start with a tribute to the divine power which rules the world according to mythological presumptions. But India is not a country which believes in one God. Talking about the number of Gods to be remembered before starting any work, Balram in a cynical tone, says:

I guess Your Excellency that I too should start off by kissing some god’s arse.
Which god’s arse, though? There are so many choices.
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 divine arses for me to choose from ^[1].

The multi-god concept (polytheism) of Hindu religion is always looked down upon by the western world, but the narrator’s approach to this, surprises the common reader. The practice of criticising Gods is not new to Indian society. While a few are thinking from the scientific angle and looking at religion or Gods with suspicion, most of the people, take pride in looking down upon the other religions, their practices and even so-called Gods. Use of religion has become a new practice in the country which perhaps has no ‘faith factor’ in it. But the use of the word like ‘arse’ surely makes the reader to suspect the intentions of the writer.

‘Arse’ refers to ‘a person’s buttocks or anus.’ The approach of the writer is heavily criticized by many. On the other side, an inclusion of all the gods from all the religions shows writer’s intention not to spare anything.

Ganga is considered to be the holy river according to the strong mythological beliefs. People not only from all over India but from the whole world come to Benaras to feel the sacred power of the holy river. They wish to witness the rituals performed on the banks of Ganga. But Adiga terms it the “black river”:

Which black river am I talking about- 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 ^[2].

After initial reference to the river, Balram advises Chinese Premier not to believe in the words of the Prime Minister. The narrator also warns Mr Jiabao against the advice of the Prime Minister to take a dip in the river. Balram pictures the worst condition of the so-called holy river:

No!- Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids ^[3].

The praises like ‘Mother Ganga,’ ‘daughter of the Vedas,’ ‘river of illumination,’ ‘protector of us all,’ and ‘breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth’ are used by the writer with an intention of mocking the sacred river. Though the words of the writer are unkind for the religious lot, truly speaking the situation is not otherwise. The river of salvation has now become the horror of pollution. The writer’s observation can

be denied on the basis of faith. As the river is highly placed in the hearts of the countrymen, many criticise the attitude of the writer of defaming the holy river. But a neutral reader will have no objection in accepting the facts presented by the writer.

The Narrator's comments on Lord Buddha and Buddhism also need to be considered thoroughly. His approach towards Buddhism is not as critical as Hinduism. One obvious reason is the man with whom he is talking. Mr Jiabao is a Chinese Premier, and China follows Buddhism. But still, the religion could not save itself from the sharp approach of the writer. The earlier number of Gods does not include Buddha in it but when we are told about a scene between the School Inspector and Balram, we find the reaction of the Narrator that suggests all- "Oops! Thirty-six million and five--!"- adding one more to the earlier figure. He deliberately stops himself from filling the word 'arse' in the blank space. The popular belief of Lord Buddha's passing through his district is also seen with doubt by the Narrator. He says:

I wonder if the Buddha walked through Laxmangarh- some people say he did. My own feeling is that he ran through it- as fast as he could- and got to the other side- and never looked back!^[4]

Balram does not believe in the story because he finds no traces of Buddhist values in his village. The description of Bodh Gaya, a town connected with Lord Buddha, is perhaps an attempt of the writer to please the Chinese Premier who also follow Buddhism. Talking about the town Balram says:

This is a famous district-world famous. Your nation's history has been shaped by my district, Mr Jiabao. Surely you have heard of Bodh Gaya- the town where the Lord Buddha sat under a tree and found his enlightenment and started Buddhism, which then spread to the whole world, including China- and where it is, but right here in my home district^[5].

One reference which catches the attention of the readers is of Hanuman- the Monkey God - who is worshipped on a large scale in India. Here perhaps the writer is trying to highlight the slavish mentality of the Indian people. While narrating a mythological tale of Hanuman and Lord Ram, the Narrator says:

Do you know about Hanuman sir? He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love and devotion. These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us. Mr Jiabao. Understand now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India^[6].

The reference shocks the common reader and he finds it difficult to take the remark lightly where the relationship of Hanuman and Lord Ram has been attributed with the tag of 'slavery.' Hanuman is known for his devotion to Lord Rama and he is an epitome of service to the Indian minds. Naturally, this attitude of the writer received severe

criticism. Perhaps Adiga, through Balram, is just trying to portray the slavish mentality of the Indians because of their excessive belief in religion. Balram's habit of repeatedly touching his master's feet is seen with the same angle of slavish mentality. It is probably because of the ingrained habit of slavery "hammered into his skull, nail after nail, and poured into his blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga^[7]." But the critics have their own take on such an attitude of a writer. K.K. Singh in his book *Booker's Book in India* says:

... it has become the common habit of the Indian writers who often use such pinching words to defy the status and significance of our gods and goddesses in order to catch the attention of the Western readers who are still hostile and aggressive towards Indian custom, religion, culture and traditional approach of Indian life^[8].

The Muslim community is also targeted by the writer. Some of the incidents from the novel show a deep hatred for a particular community. The Narrator is shown making fun of the holy number attached with the Muslim community. The community has a strange belief in 786- the number which can do miracles for them. Talking about the number, the Narrator says:

... just before the movie got started, either the number 786 would flash against the black screen- the Muslims think this is a magic number that represents their god^[9].

Ram Persad hides his religious identity for his livelihood because the owner of the house does not like Muslims. He worships Hindu idols and even chants mantras to save his job. Balram says:

What 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 one than I will ever be^[10].

A prejudiced approach from the side of a landlord and the extreme need of a job makes him go against his religious conventions.

Another small incident is an instance of a mentality of an average Indian towards a particular community. Roshan, the Stork's grandson calls himself Azharuddin, the captain of India, while playing cricket. The Stork reacts quickly and asks the grandson to call himself Gavaskar because Azharuddin is a Muslim. The deep-rooted hatred of a person of a particular religion towards another is reflected very strongly through this incident. For Ashok, Balram's master, humanity is more important than religion. His response reflects the modern way of thinking which in some cases transcends the barriers of religion. In a reference to Azharuddin and Gavaskar, he says: "Father what a silly thing to say! Hindu and Muslim, what a difference does it make^[11]?" The Stork replies in a mocking tone: "Oh, you young people and your modern ideas!"^[12] The age-old mentality refuses to accept the change and remains stuck to it in spite of being the progressive approach of the few.

A reference of the great Urdu poets is also made with an intention of mockery. A prejudiced approach of the writer

becomes visible when we find him criticising the Muslims as illiterate and the destroyer of buildings:

Iqbal, who is one of the four best poets in the world- the others being Rumi, Mirza Ghalib, and the fourth fellow, also a Muslim, whose name I have forgotten-.....

A great poet, this fellow Iqbal- even if he was a Muslim.

(By the way, Mr Premier: have you noticed that all four of the greatest poets in the world are Muslim? And yet all the Muslims you meet are illiterate or covered head to toe in black burkas or looking for buildings to blow up? It's a puzzle, isn't it? If you ever figure these people out, send me an e-mail ^[13]).

Throughout the novel, the Muslim community has been mentioned in a belittling manner only. The writer is not only indifferent towards Muslims but also the Urdu language. The reference of Urdu as "the language of the Muslims- which is all just scratches and dots, as if some crow dipped its feet in black ink and pressed them to the page" ^[14] is really not acceptable. The Urdu language gave the world some of the greatest literary pleasures.

Adiga, through his novel, perhaps wishes for a spiritual reorientation and a rationalism which can help the common man to get rid of the darkness of ignorance. His dream to start "a school where you won't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with plays and stories about God and Gandhi" ^[15] also seems to sideline the age-old impacts on Indian minds.

Balram's 'adoption' of religious nature can be seen in his showing respect to the sacred tree on the road. To win the favour of his master Mr Ashok and his wife Pinky, Balram bows his head before a tree. It's all with a sole purpose of deceiving his masters. Religion is used for personal gains. That's what is the picture of the society today. Putting statues and stickers of Goddess Laxmi and Kali on a dashboard of the car also reveals Balram's 'skin saving attitude.' He touches the magnetic stickers of Goddess Kali for good luck and at the same time calls her by the name "old witch." A reference is given to three gods and Gandhi watching the process of giving bribe to the police, and the calendar on the wall is shown with Goddess Laxmi "showering coins from a pot into the river of prosperity" ^[16]. All these instances are suffice to understand the approach of the Narrator towards religion which is certainly not sincere. The Narrator also refers to the attraction of the foreigners towards India. The cultural diversity, spirituality had always been a matter of interest for the Westerners. Talking about the foreigners, Balram says:

Now, Mr Premier, every day thousands of foreigners fly into my country for enlightenment. They go to the Himalayas, or to Benaras, or to Bodh Gaya. They get into weird poses of Yoga, smoke hashish, shag a sadhu or two, and think they're getting enlightened ^[17].

It is very true that the foreigners have a kind of bent towards Indian spirituality. After spending a life with excessive love for materialistic things, they find solace in the peaceful

world of spirituality here. The religious values provide them with enlightenment. But Adiga seems to make fun of the approach of the foreigners also.

Dharma is a rightful way of leading a life. No religion in the world ever preaches bad things. From time immemorial, it has remained as the best institution of moral values. It shapes the lives of all in some way or the other. India, no doubt, is at the peak when it comes to religious values. So many religions blossomed here and are living together. If Indian culture and religions preach the values of Truth, Love, Non-violence, Tolerance, then what is that which makes a man like Halwai to break the social codes of morality. It is certainly not religion which forms his way of living. Then who is Balram? Balram is an opportunist. He makes a show of religious faith to win the favour of his master. His touching of an eye with the finger or hand while passing by a temple or a sacred tree, or his revelation of Ram Persad's religious identity or his attempt of showing himself as dutiful as Hanuman are all instances that prove a person an opportunist, and not a believer.

Some of the critics find a Marxist attitude of the writer behind his approach towards religion in his writing. Marxists talk of replacing God with Marx. Adiga takes pride in insulting the religious beliefs and symbols. Writing letters to Chinese Premier Mr Jiabao also hints at the communist bent of mind of the writer, as China is a country with a Communist political system. In the early part of his letter only, he writes to Chinese Premier after telling him the number of gods in India;

Now, there are some, and I don't just mean Communists like you who think that not many of these gods actually exist. It's true that all these gods seem to do awfully little work- much like our politicians- and yet keep winning re-election to their golden thrones in heaven, year after year ^[18].

His outright rejection of "God and Gandhi" certainly shows the readers his inclination towards Marxism. Perhaps one may call it an honest attempt of the writer to make the people aware of religious slavery. Whatever is the case with Adiga's approach but it seems that he takes much liberty in expressing his views on a sensitive topic like religion and offends the faith of the millions of people in the country. Sahib Uddin in his article "Aravind Adiga's India in *The White Tiger*" aptly puts:

We have our rich traditional culture which is truly oriental and which conforms to the teachings and precepts of our saints and forefathers. It is the dynamism and suppleness that have enabled our culture to survive amidst diversities and heavy odds. Indian culture is, in fact, a continuous synthesis and is able to preserve its own identity in the midst of many external influences. It is partly true that the Indian mind has assimilated much of the thinking of the western culture to enrich itself. The western modes of dress, entertainment etc. especially in the urban areas may often be mentioned. But the western materialism still fails to woo Indian spiritualism, austerity, tolerance and harmony ^[19].

Conclusion

Adiga probably thinks the religion as an evil power which contributes in strengthening the “rooster coop” and making the man a slave of religious laws imposed by the age-old traditions. Adiga is perhaps trying to urge the people to get out of that coop and lead a free life. But the writer finds it impossibility in the country which is deeply stuck to the norms set by the religion.

“The spiritual idealism of ancient India in a state of chaos and complexity is adversely being affected. Adiga like a cameraman discovers the dark corners of the civilization of India that is obscure but naked and authentic ^[20].” The questions can be raised at the writer’s intention but it is equally true that the things which are presented by the writer have a certain point of reality in it. Perhaps the reader knows it and knowingly discards it.

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