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Existentialism: A Study of Survival in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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“Existentialism” is one of the most exciting and creative movements in the modern world and the term applied to a theory which deeply influenced a large number of writers, audiences, socialists, philosophers and critics. It concentrates the utter existence of individual person as a free agent. In general sense it examines with recurring problems of finding meanings within existence. ‘Existentialism’, as a literary theory touched the most delicate, soft emotional and psychological issues of modern human beings and attracted a large number of authors, critics and philosophers in India as well.

Human life has been a complex and a multifaceted reality defying conceptual formulation and hence the contemporary mind has been continually engaged in search of knowledge seeking to impose meaning on the chaos of experience, shape an orderly picture of life and evolve coherent patterns of thought from overabundance of ardent observation to comprehend man’s existence. Existence has never been an easy ordeal for man for it correlates with his struggle for survival in the universe materialistically, psychically and spiritually. In this critical process, various schools of thought have come up with their theoretical approaches such as, Naturalism, Realism, Idealism, Feminism, Materialism, Existentialism, etc., that have helped discover rational basis for understanding a number of phenomena. These theories encompass a wide spectrum of concepts such as God, Man, pain, anguish, absurdity, abandonment, suffering, fatalism etc., as this form the fulcrum of existential realities. Hence, “Existentialism” can be easily underlined, not always easy though to be defined, as it makes its presence felt in many segments of human existence, more so with routine affairs of life.

The quest for discovering the bare rumblings of life in its most basic form is an inalienable aspect of the philosophical framework of existentialist thought. A constant struggle with one’s own self shows the real way to find the meaning in one’s life. This fundamental journey for self-exploration and self-discovery can be quite unpredictable and accidental, could begin with any shade of experience and it could be utter disappointment, disgust, or simple loss or ennui or in primary human tendency for seeking happiness and fulfilment in life. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* deals with this typical existential strain in an evocative and poignant manner. Existential angst, in all its morbid portents engulfs the marginalised lives of the major characters in this novel, mainly as a consequence of their basic propensity for discovering the meaning of life, however futile it might work out to be at the end of it all. In this never-ending desperation for finding meaning in existence, human beings deploy an equally high degree of steely resolve and perseverance. In fact, swimming against the current, these rank minorities only end up in experiencing inevitable pangs of loneliness and isolation, resulting in despair and devastation.

In the galaxy of post-colonial writers who made “Existentialism” as their springboard as well as prime motif in their works, Aravind Adiga stands out as an extraordinary literary figure. Among the new age writers of the Diaspora, Aravind Adiga has created a special place in the literary traditions of postcolonial writing by capturing the quintessential existential moorings, angst & subliminal pathos found at the crossroads of transnational cultural conflict. Never one to shy away from stirring the strains of alienation and disquiet enveloping the inherent exilic state in which all dislocated lives of Indian diaspora find themselves in, Aravind Adiga’s novels just become their finest platform.

The White Tiger, essentially captures the dichotomy and duality in the lives caught in the contraries interaction between Master and Servant i.e. Ashok and Balram. Brought to life on a literary canvass through the many lively characters and myriad emotions, this saga of psychological trauma and despondency adds a socio cultural immediacy to the issue of existential crisis that affect every conceivable aspect of an immigrant’s subaltern life. Aravind Adiga enamored of undertaking “journeys” in multiple forms tries to explore the existential strains permeating the lives of his characters. The self-effacing existentialist that he is, Aravind Adiga’s works evocatively show unmistakable traces of the existential philosophy of Sartre, Albert Camus’ and Kierkegaard while being populated with themes of frustration, upheaval, angst, a sense of alienation, rejection of authority and existential predicament.

Balram Halwai in *The white Tiger* is a poor Indian villager whose great ambition leads him to the pinnacle of Indian business culture, the world of the Bangalore entrepreneur. On the occasion of the president of China’s impending trip to Bangalore, Balram writes a letter to him describing his transformation and his experience as driver and servant to a wealthy Indian family, which he thinks exemplifies the contradictions and complications of Indian society. Balram moves to New Delhi with Ashok and his wife Ms Pinky Madam. Throughout their time in New Delhi, Balram is exposed to the extensive corruption of India’s society, including the government. In New Delhi, the separation between poor and wealthy becomes even more evident by the juxtaposition of the wealthy with poor city dwellers. One night Pinky decides to drive the car by herself and hits something. She is worried that it was a child and the family eventually decides to frame Balram for the hit and run case.

The police tell them that no one reported a child missing so that luckily no further inquiry is done. Ashok becomes increasingly involved with the corrupt government itself. Having being humiliated so many times, during a trip back to his village Balram insults his grandmother and tells the reader and the Chinese Premier that in the next eight months he intends to kill his boss. Balram then decides that the only way that he will be able to escape India's "Rooster Coop" (The White Tiger, 320) will be by killing and robbing Ashok. Balram learns how to siphon gas, deals with corrupt mechanics and refill and resell Johnnie Walker black label bottles (all but one). He also finds a way out of the coop that no one else inside it can perceive.

Aravind 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). There are so many examples Aravind Adiga has shown for the humiliation of Balram Halwai. Balram is not only a driver for Mr. Ashok but also a servant carrying bags in the malls, cooking and masseur for the stork, and so on. The mean mentality of the rich is shown through the lost coin episode in the novel. A one rupee coin of Mongoose, the brother of Mr. Ashok is lost while getting out of the car. He was so money minded and he asked Balram to search for it. As Aravind Adiga writes in the novel,

"Get down on your knees. Look for it on the floor of the car. I got down on my knees. I sniffed in between the mats like a doe, all in search of that one rupee. What do you mean, it is not there? Don't think you can steal from us just because you are in the city. I want that rupee'. We've just paid half a million rupees in a bribe, Mukesh, and now we are screwing this man over a single rupee. Let's go up and have a scotch. That's how you corrupt servants. It starts with one rupee. Don't bring your American ways here'. Where that rupee coin went remains a mystery to me to this day Mr. Premier. Finally, I took a rupee coin out of my shirt pocket, dropped it on the floor of the car, picked it up, and gave it to the Mongoose". (The White Tiger, 139)

The novel is somewhat of an account of Balram's journey to find his freedom in modern day capitalist society. The work shows a modern day, with free market and free business. It also shows how it can create economic division. In India there are not social classes, but social castes. The novel portrays India's society as negative towards the lower social caste. When Balram was asked which caste he was from, he knew that it could ultimately cause a biased stance in his employer and determine the future of his employment. There is definitely a big difference seen in Balram's lower caste from back home and his current higher caste in their lifestyles, habits, and standards of living.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* at a subtle plane, is an extraordinary tale of existential themes and moorings, spoken in an easy and simple language of a common man. It captures the existential angst in its most evocative strain in the emotionally ravaging pangs of disillusionment and despair, loneliness and alienation as characterised by the two major characters i.e., Balram, and Ashok. Existential angst, widely perceived as an integral theme of 'Existentialism' offers a pan continental and trans-generational phenomenon. Existential angst encompasses in its ambit feelings of anxiety, unease, fear or agony and disquiet. This angst is quite intriguing in its origin and motives. It may be an offshoot of any experience or event or, could be a generic and random reaction to the quintessential hollowness of life and its meaninglessness. The votaries of existential way of literary pursuit have always shown preoccupation with scale and enormous sweep of angst and also the equally urgent need to develop an understanding of its ramifications. The existential writers have always brought the travails of the ordinary modern man, his existence, freedom and choice as important agendas. Anguish, in the opinion of Sartre, has meant "awareness of our own freedom over our character." (Webber, 2009:67). Aravind Adiga's works, in fact, on a largely continuous pattern have brought to the fore the inner rumblings of the self and the psyche as an offshoot of the ever widening space amid the galloping pace of globalization and immigration. In the present work, he straddles a multitude of issues by extrapolating diverse themes like identity, culture, place and custom and interweaving them into the larger canvas. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) is a post-colonial novel in real sense. Colonial mentality is characterized by the slavish mentality of the characters belonging to have-not class. Silent obedience, meek sufferings, humiliation and ill criticism are the inseparable experiences of these people. It is observed a few instances of victims from lower caste and lower class in almost all Indian English works. Balram is the first person to revolt against injustice and exploitation. Novel stands out due to this change in author's point of view. Indian economy was opened to foreign traders, investors and businessmen since 1990. This globalization had its effects on the social and cultural life of Indians along with the financial matters. Literature is the demonstration of sociocultural movements of the country. Indian society became liberal in approach toward each other. New social ethos finds its place in the both novels. Previously Indian people were exploited on the basis of "caste" and "gender" in the history mostly. The rich people used to exploit the poor people in the past. Today exploitation has acquired one more dimension. Needy people irrespective of their caste have been exploited in the modern industrialized world. Nobody talked about Biju and his father's caste in the entire novel. People looked at them as the objects of exploitation and exploited them as much as possible. But globalization, instead of relieving them of their trouble, has added further difficulties to the existing ones. For example, Cook stayed at the judge's residence for many years. Biju, his son would also have been given accommodation at one place or the other in the same house. His migration to America proved miserable and demoralizing for him. This study of *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is a story of modern India. It reflects the journey of an individual (Balram Halwai) from a dar background to a wealthy entrepreneur. His experiences are the main theme of the novel It could be referred to as novel which in broad terms is the eye opener for India. It is to say that this is the novel where all the issues from democracy, religion, culture to caste, class and globalization are covered.

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