

occasion one is left wondering if the chapterisation is of any consequence. If Trikha's bumpy prose is not enough, the numerous typographical errors are bound to catch attention.

There are also some statements in the book which give away an element of thoughtlessness. Trikha describes *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* in Aristotelian terms as a play that leaves the audience purged 'from their passions spent and calm of mind restored'. Immediately afterward he states that in the play, 'Karnad, like Brecht intends to "break down the emphatic link between spectator and performer"' (p.72). Trikha finds no contradiction between Aristotelian and Brechtian methods. While discussing the passion of the masses in *Tughlaq* he suggests that Karnad's play helps interpret the communalism of the 1990s in India which has 'to an extent effected (sic) secular image of Hinduism' (p.62. My emphasis)!

The book opens with a Foreword by G.J.V. Prasad which traces Karnad as a bilingualist, as someone who is deft in both English and Kannad, and able to move from one language to another with ease. Prasad refers to Karnad's beginnings at Oxford to lay stress on his return to India even though the promise of a different fame beckoned him in the form of representing India in English, the diasporic route adopted by many. Karnad's return to India brought him in company with generation of playwrights who together transformed the modern Indian stage.

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Arvind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, Noida: Harper Collins India, 2008. pp. 321. Rs. 395

Arvind Adiga's debut novel *The White Tiger* created many a ripple when it bagged the Man Booker for Fiction for 2008. The Booker Committee judges praised it as a "new voice", an eye-opener with rare insight and sound ending. The western reviewers were tickled by the "chatty" murderer protagonist's exposé of "the underbelly of India's tiger economy"; his ability to lift the lid off the "economic miracle" of India and the courage to show its darker aspects.

The Indian reviewers were not as amused though. For some the novel is "inauthentic", for others just "tedious and unfunny slog." Many question Adiga's credentials as an insider-outsider to write about India. Son of a doctor, and having lived and studied primarily in the USA, England and Australia his knowledge about "real

India" seems to be limited to media coverage, contend his critics.

The novel tells the story of one Balram Halwai, resident of Laxmangarh in Gaya district. In school it is drummed into them that they are lucky to belong to a place where Lord Buddha received "Light". Balram contends, however, that it is Darkness they are doomed to live in. Balram recounts how he learnt to dream big, got out of Darkness and became a successful entrepreneur. But unfortunately, his is not the usual rag to riches tale worth emulating. It is not even a crime-thriller. It is a grim and angry narrative in epistolary form. The letters are written to the Chinese Premier in the course of seven nights. Balram Halwai is not "an original thinker" but he is "an original listener." As Mr. Ashok's chauffeur he picks up a few useful tricks and becomes adept at turning everything to his advantage. As a fugitive murderer he fears detection but knowing the working of our law enforcing machinery, he is relaxed and chooses to narrate his tale to the visiting Premier.

With his mordant humor, bitter sarcasm and amusing observations the protagonist reveals his march from childhood to manhood, from his innocent past to his corrupt present. Reading on, we put the pieces together and know that his father was an impoverished rickshaw-puller but he had a dream — to educate his son, so that "he should live like a man." But Balram cannot continue his education, he has to work as teashop boy. His parents die untimely death spewing blood lying in a dirty government hospital without medical aid. The narrative goes to and fro and we find ourselves interested further in him, to know how a child who cannot see even a lizard being killed and whose biggest boyhood ideal/idol is the bus conductor, Vijay (with his Khaki uniform and a shining whistle) becomes an inveterate murderer and a grabbing entrepreneur. That is what keeps us glued to the story.

Balram tells a few key points to the readers in the beginning: first, he is a fugitive murderer; second, the police are after him; and third, he cannot be caught as long as he has the "brown" envelop and there are officials ready to accept it. Another significant pointer pertains to his identity. He starts his life without a name but amazingly, he acquires four identities that come handy to him in his chequered career.

His parents call him Munna but since it is not a real name the teacher decides on Balram. Soon, impressed by his quickness the school Inspector calls him "White Tiger" a rare species in "this jungle" of idiots (p.35). In Delhi his rustic ways earn him an appellation "Country-Mouse". Subsequently, he becomes — Ashok — and flourishes as Ashok Sharma, the entrepreneur. Once the school

Inspector had gifted him a book entitled *Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi* which he never read but unfortunately, he becomes a regular reader of the *Murder Weekly* handed down by his driver friends.

This otherwise grim murder story becomes amusing with Arvind Adiga's acute sense of humor. Balram boasts to the Chinese Premier that one day India will beat China in progress because we may not have drinking water, good roads, sewage system, Olympic Gold medals but we have democracy. It is another matter that our democracy is run by beastly musclemen, upstarts like the conductor-turned-politician, and the Great Socialist with ninety-three criminal cases pending against him.

The novel works on irony: Balram, who is a victim of the malevolent system never thinks of heralding change when he gets wealth, albeit by criminal means. He adopts with ease the devious ways of the corrupt whom he has detested all along. He has chalked out his plan to move from one enterprise to another: from Call Center Taxi business he will shift to real estate and thereafter open a school where the children will be taught *great lessons* of life and not about Gandhi or Buddha. One shudders to think of an educational institution run by a semi-literate, unscrupulous murderer.

Witty turns of phrase, mordant humour and acute observations give strength to the story to hold readers' interest. Balram is unrepentant, "I'll never say I made a mistake that night. . . when I slit my master's throat. 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" (pp.320-21). But somewhere in his heart he seems to be sorry for his master. He is a restless man troubled by nightmares and uncertainty. Still he makes things light. He never appears worried and here we cannot but appreciate his tenacity as he closes his narrative with the declaration, "I think I am ready to have children, Mr. Premier" (p.321). We keep down the book with a big, disturbing question before us: what kind of progeny will he produce?

Writing for *Times Literary Supplement*, Sameer Rahim observes that the novel resembles the stories of the *Murder Weekly* which feed Balram's imagination, "quick, entertaining and full of vividly drawn types: the scheming servant, the corrupt businessman, the spoilt wife."

To be fair to Adiga, however, let us say that whatever be the merits and demerits of *The White Tiger*, it cannot be denied that it raises some pressing social issues and though we find it hard to sympathize with Adiga's villainous protagonist we cannot but appreciate the caustic humour with which he exposes the ever widening social gaps, the corroding political system and the erosion of values. "I'm tomorrow," Adiga has Balram utter with confidence. Will this be the signal of our future – corrupt, unscrupulous and devilish?

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