

The fatal flaw in Balram Halwai's engaging personality; his enormous ego and our consequent lack of sympathy

A mass of contradictions, Aravind Adiga's Balram Halwai is a charismatic man, but one whose ambitions are steered by a self-admiration and an insatiable desire for more power. Frankly depicting the moral and systematic corruption of India, The White Tiger follows Balram's journey from a simple, naïve village boy to a savage city businessman. While Balram displays an engaging personality which allows readers to somewhat sympathise with him, his conceited self-image has a detrimental effect on our ability to understand his ruthless actions. Finally, Balram's smug attitude once he reaches Bangalore reiterates that we shouldn't have ever felt sympathy for him during his rise through the social system.

Somewhat admirable in personality due to his humorous take on the sombre realities of the caste system, Balram effectively captivates readers through the epistolary structure of the novel. Through this structure, he is able to distort the reader's opinion of him and subtly condone the decisions he makes later in the text. The knowledge of his upbringing in the midst of the "darkness", with "defunct" electricity poles, "broken" water taps and children "too lean and short" for their age justifies his relentless drive to escape his lifestyle and advance into the "light". Balram makes it clear at the beginning of the text that he is tied to his family financially, and the fact that he is denied all but "90 rupees" (less than two dollars) to himself somewhat evokes sympathy for him and partially rationalizes his choice to withhold money from his family later in the text. In Balram's first few letters he alludes to the lack of power those in poverty have in terms of improving their circumstances in a country whose political system privileges the rich over the poor. Hence, readers are positioned to feel sympathy for Balram for being trapped in the confines of his society, and therefore later proud of Balram once he achieves the great feat of escaping the "rooster coop".

Despite his positive characteristics, Balram's arrogance works against him in that it inspires disgust in readers in response to his lack of remorse for his selfish choices. From the moment the inspector labels him "The White Tiger", Balram becomes invested in his own reputation as a rare and special specimen, beginning to believe that due to this he deserves to do whatever he wishes to achieve his aspirations in life. His self-declaration as an "exceptional servant" and his belief that the Rooster Coop "needs people like [him] to break out of it" serve him as justifications for his immorality. Balram's betrayal of Ram Persad, exposing the way he "claimed to be a Hindu" and blackmailing both him and the Nepali about his dishonesty, stems from his confidence that he is the one of the "99.9 percent" who is designed to escape "perpetual servitude". Furthermore, Balram's clear knowledge of the fate of his family after his murder of Ashok, strengthened by the story he heard about the family who was "hunted, beaten and burned alive" as a result of their son's transgression, does not prevent him from striving for his own fortune at their expense. As he himself admits he must be an "inhuman wretch of a monster" to do so, this is a choice that would understandably disgust readers and certainly would not present Balram as a laudable character, nor one to feel sympathy for.

While Balram may have had readers caught between praising and loathing him during his social climb to Bangalore, once he achieved his aspirations, his sentiments about his efforts to do so undoubtedly prevent any further sympathy being elicited for him. Balram "gloat[s]" that Ashok's family could establish a "reward of a million dollars on [his] head, and it [would] not matter". His constant reiteration that he has "switched sides" only suggests that he has become what he always despised in his master, the same rapacious and egocentric man Ashok was, therefore eliminating any compassion for him produced by his unfortunate circumstances early on in his life. Balram's glee is emphasised through multiple expressions of a sense of achievement, seen in his desire to "throw [his] hands up and holler" and his declaration that he "made it". Even after brutally ending Ashok's

life, Balram's thoughts are less focused on his recent sin but rather on the fact that he can now "play the music as long as [he] wanted". It is ultimately this kind of disregard for any moral principles and Balram's clear lack of remorse that drives readers away from feeling sympathy for his character.

Adiga expresses how oppressive societies bring to light the objectionable characteristics of people who are striving to improve their own situation and gain power. Whether likable or outrageous, Balram's treatment of others ultimately exemplifies the destructive nature of such an oppressive social system on individuals.

