

The narration of Balram Halwai is one of a person as ruthless as those above him in the social strata. Do you agree?

Whilst illustrating the wide social disparity between the rich and the poor in Indian society, Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* unveils the complexities of human nature through protagonist Balram Halwai's narrative voice. As a self-dubbed entrepreneur, Balram dictates a seven-night long letter to the Chinese Premier, uncovering an autobiographical tale that outlines his escape from impoverished rural India and his transformation into an upper-class citizen. His identity as a member of the upper class is exemplified in his narration which betrays the voice of an egotistical person who carries self-perceptions of superiority, and through deliberate attempts at displaying his freedom of expression in a somewhat ruthless and arbitrary manner. This is, however, reduced to an extent, as Adiga, throughout the novel, subtly exposes a fragile and vulnerable side to Balram which suggest that despite having climbed the social ladder, there are remnants of servant mentality.

Throughout his letter to the Chinese Premier, elements of Balram's self-perceived superiority are exhibited through uncouth language choices that partially reflect the ruthlessness of the upper class. In escaping the darkness and overcoming the unyielding conditions of the 'rooster coop', a social paradigm employed by Adiga to illustrate the disparate lifestyles of the rich and poor in Indian society, Balram develops an egotistical temperament that is strikingly similar to people of the social elite. He constantly makes reference to "that phrase that can only be said in English", that is, "what a fucking joke", a rather barbarous phrase acquired from the American Pinky Madam. That Balram uttered this phrase upon hearing about the Chinese Premier's scheduled visit to India highlights his ability to exercise freedom of expression – a privilege enjoyed by those who are ranked higher in the social strata – even against respected figures of authority. The use of this rather vulgar phrase, therefore, exemplifies the diminished sense of loyalty that Balram once carried as a servant, but now no longer does given that "[he is his] own boss". In effect, he separates himself from old traditional ties and boastfully claims that "I complain about the police the way the rich complain; not the way the poor complain" which is a reference to a minor inconvenience relating to his police bribery. Adiga characterises Balram as an arrogant social upstart, highlighting his disregard for the harsh experiences people in the darkness are subjected to such as living "behind bars, taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters". Thus, in exhibiting his superiority throughout his narration, Balram emulates the ruthlessness of the upper class, which has no obligation to express loyalty to higher authorities, and is ignorant of the harsh circumstances suffered by those at the bottom of the social ladder.

Some peculiar phrases in the novel, which further exhibit Balram's ruthlessness, inject a degree of malevolence in Balram's narration.

Balram's ruthlessness is further exhibited through some peculiar phrases that inject malevolence in his narration.

Adiga infuses phrases in Balram's narration that embody his ruthlessness and malevolence.

Whilst this type of ruthlessness may partially reflect the voice of someone higher in the social strata, the eeriness of Balram's voice can be attributed to his unique personality. First, his self-characterisation as "a freak, a pervert of nature" is found to be true in his fascination with murder, whereby he spookily takes pleasure in the idea that he "knew [Mr. Ashok's] corpse, while the

parents know the foetus". Adiga thus employs the symbolism of 'the white tiger' – the "rarest beast in the jungle" – to highlight Balram's uniqueness. In being "the creature that comes only once in a generation", Balram is therefore different from the two ends of the social hierarchy – he exercises a cunning that combines both the predatory elements of the upper class and the savagery of the lower class. . Thus, being desensitised from the anguish of death, Balram breaks free from the traditional family-oriented mentality that governs the lifestyle of rural villagers, and essentially consigns the rest of his family to death by murdering Mr. Ashok. In this way, Adiga integrates Balram's attitudes with those of the upper class. A patronising claim that "I've got no family anymore" reflects that of Mr. Ashok's: "you know how close they are to their families in the darkness". Hence, through his narrative voice, Balram demonstrates that he has elevated to a higher position in the social strata. Whilst this is exemplified in his diminished attachment to family, Balram's eerie fascination with murder, though ruthless, is one unique characteristic that is not associated with those in the upper class.

Instead, some aspects of Balram's narration suggest that there are still underlying remnants of servant mentality. His fascination about murder matches that of other down-trodden Indian drivers who indulge in the Murder Weekly magazines which trigger fantasies about their masters' deaths. It is Balram's obsession over Mr. Ashok, however, that exposes the nuances in his character. Whilst he assures the Chinese Premier that he "won't stop protecting [Mr. Ashok's] good name", and thus displays signs of an instinctive loyalty, this slight degree of loyalty is heavily undermined by his amoral disposition. In a subtle manner, Adiga drops cues about Balram's bi-sexuality – Balram refers to Mr. Ashok as his 'ex' throughout the narration and expresses his yearning for "the intimacy between me and Mr. Ashok". In this way, Balram implies that he has the liberty to control his own thoughts without being restrained by the boundaries set by the codes of morality and traditional customs, just as those belonging in the higher social strata are able to enjoy these freedoms. However, he also deliberately attempts not to appear too egotistical and suggests to the Premier that despite escaping from the darkness and entering into the wealthier class, his decisions are still restricted partially by some moral responsibility. He claims that he "wants to express deep sorrow" when apologising to the mother of a death victim in an accident his employee causes and proclaims to the Chinese Premier that he is "now really in the light", implying that he has also developed a kind-heart as well as earning material wealth.

Balram's narrative voice, on one hand, defines him as a citizen of the higher social strata though some elements reveal a peculiarity that manifest his uniqueness. Ultimately, Adiga illustrates the complexity of human nature and the transformation it is subjected to under various social contexts through Balram's narration.