

The White Tiger: A portrait of India's masters and servants

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The White Tiger, the latest film from Iranian-American director Rahmin Bahrani, is an important treatment of contemporary Indian reality and the massive class gulf between the rich and the poor.

Bahrani's work, streaming on Netflix, is an adaptation of Indian-Australian writer Arvind Adiga's debut novel of the same title, which won the Man Booker Prize in 2008. Bahrani has done some remarkable work, including *99 Homes* (2015), *Chop Shop* (2007) and *Man Push Cart* (2005). He is a talented filmmaker, sensitive to the problems of contemporary life across the globe.

The White Tiger is a coming of age story about a poor rural Indian boy named Balram Halwai (Adarsh Gourav), who escapes the crushing poverty of his village of Laxmangarh. The film begins with Balram in the present writing an email to the visiting Chinese premier Wen Jinbao. Balram recounts his own story and likens the brutality of life for the poor in modern-day India to chickens trapped in a coop.

A gifted youth, Balram is offered a scholarship to go to a school in the Indian capital of Delhi. A school inspector who promotes a "Great Socialist" politician recognizes him as a rare "white tiger." Balram's frail father, meanwhile, is preyed upon by the local village landlord, "The Stork." Balram's family ends up owing money to the gangster-landlord that they cannot pay. The youth's dreams of Delhi are dashed by his grandmother and he is condemned to a childhood of grueling toil. Balram's father subsequently dies of tuberculosis.

Balram eventually becomes a chauffeur for the landlord's son, Ashok (Rajkumar Rao). He usurps the post by exposing his predecessor as a Muslim who hid his faith to keep his job. Balram's opportunist, instrumental attitude toward such issues is clearly

intended by the filmmakers to suggest the manner in which religion is viewed and used by the Indian ruling elite and its parties.

Ashok has spent time in the United States and comes back to India to pursue entrepreneurship with his Indian-American fiancée, Pinky (Priyanka Chopra). Ashok is eventually tasked by his father to bribe the so-called "Great Socialist" politician in Delhi so the family can avoid paying taxes.

Ashok and Pinky begin to act toward Balram with a mixture of condescension and pity. On Pinky's birthday, Balram drives the two to a bar where they get very drunk. When they return, the heavily intoxicated Pinky insists on taking the wheel. As they drive back and pass homeless families encamped along the way, Pinky runs over and kills a child. Ashok and Pinky, along with a horrified Balram, flee the scene.

A series of indignities follow. Balram's employers coerce him into signing a false confession. They then conspire to get rid of him. Balram is left to fend for himself and plots a desperate action. Eventually, he flees with a large sum of money to the city of Bangalore ("the Silicon Valley of India" as he puts it), where he goes into business after bribing the local police and becomes a wealthy underground entrepreneur himself.

The White Tiger has many strengths, chief of which is its relatively unvarnished look at the brutality of the vast class divide in India. The depiction of India's newly rich entrepreneurs as predatory and gangster-like rings true. These are great fortunes made through great social crimes.

"The Indian entrepreneur," Balram states early on, "has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, all at the same time ... India is two countries in one."

The film is tightly constructed for the most part and the cinematography of life in Indian villages and the big cities of Delhi and Bangalore is evocative and authentic. The portrait of village life is moving, but also severe and unsentimental. It is a haunting moment when Balram sings to a drunk Ashok in the basement where the rough drivers live in the garish “lower depths.” In another striking sequence, Balram wanders the streets of Delhi in shock and despair and loses his temper at an old beggar. Moreover, the carelessness and cruelty of the landlord’s family to their lessers, the reality of masters and servants, is also convincing. On the whole, it is a devastating picture of Indian society.

Many of the actors, including the non-professional performers help convey the harshness of life. Gourav is quite exceptional in his role as Balram and Chopra is also quite strong as Pinky.

Some of the weaknesses of the novel are less pronounced in the film, but nonetheless they exist. As we previously observed about the novel, “*The White Tiger* aims at humor, but the tone is flippant by and large, not satirical. Adiga’s attitude toward the limited and selfish aims of his protagonist [Balram] seems ambiguous.”

There is less flippancy in Bahrani’s film than in Adiga’s novel, but the resolution of Balram’s fate by his becoming something of a Nietzschean superman unwilling to accept a “slave morality” still indicates some of the problems of perspective in contemporary filmmaking and art. Balram quotes Iqbal, the great Muslim poet, “The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave.” In fact, it takes more than that.

Balram’s rebellion against servitude is an individualistic one. He opposes India’s social inequality by becoming a “master” himself, if a bit more enlightened. Cynicism clings to such an outlook even as Bahrani rightly brings out the deep gulf between the classes.

Adiga, a close friend of Bahrani (they went to Columbia University together as undergraduates), reveals some of these contradictory views in an interview with *Vulture*: “I loved the new entrepreneurial view that the Indians were showing, which was unimaginable in my time. But also it left me slightly anxious... There’s much less optimism today in India than at the time when the book was written.”

Indian society is deeply polarized today and poised for great upheavals of the working class and the oppressed masses. There are 177 billionaires in India while tens of millions suffer from crushing poverty and hunger. The policies of the Indian ruling class in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic have devastated vast numbers of the poor and oppressed. Over 160,000 people have died, according to the official count, which is likely a severe underestimate.

The far-right government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his fascistic Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) preside over an economy in near ruins as they use police repression and violence against all opposition. The rise of the far right has been facilitated by various strata of the ruling class and its appendages for over half a century, including the Congress Party and its supporters in the Stalinist parties. And some of the phony “socialism” of the Stalinists and their corruption is conveyed in Bahrani’s film, if only cursorily.

But vast social anger is coming to the fore. Earlier this year, farmers began mass protests against the Modi government’s policies that will benefit investors and agribusiness at their expense. Over one million Indian bank workers carried out a two-day strike recently against further privatization efforts. Such opposition emerges from the sharp class conflicts that have long been suppressed by the Stalinists, the trade unions and the ruling class parties. That period is coming to an end.

The White Tiger is a perceptive and pointed film, despite certain shortcomings, that exposes the lie of the Indian ruling elite that it is the “world’s biggest democracy.” It is a scathing, unavoidable portrait of a society that demands even further artistic scrutiny while official Indian cinema remains largely divorced from reality.



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