



## The Trajectory of Anguish, Affliction and Suffering in Indian Diaspora Fiction

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### Abstract

The depiction of suffering that the people undergo in villages is one of the imperative facets of the famous work *The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga. Laxmangarh "the typical Indian village paradise", as described in official handouts by the government. Laxmangarh, a backward village in Gaya District, Bihar, is the exact opposite of what it is officially flaunted to be. The novel *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry parades the pitiable conditions that these cities provide to the migrants from villages. Rohinton Mistry has realistically and graphically portrayed life in a slum. The work of Kiran Desai, titled, *The Inheritance of Loss* through the sufferings of Biju, the cook's son. Biju typifies the plight of thousands of illegal immigrants from the third world countries to the United States. The myriad ways in which fiction portrays cities and villages is the core of this paper and it'll try to bring out the ordinariness of suffering, pitiable misery and countless daily woes the characters undergo in both the settings in which the characters are positioned.

Key words: suffering, villages, urbanization, slums, immigration

Since times immemorial, India has been known as a nation whose soul lay in villages and this ethos of Indianness is very well represented in our ancient literature and which is obvious from the records and history. Our villages speak of our culture, of our civilization. In the glorious and golden past, these villages are told to have had all the facilities which can be termed cultured from the point of view of progress and development that the society then had achieved. But unfortunately, with changing of times, these rural settlements were neglected leading to concentration of developmental activities to towns and cities, the most of which were being afresh planned. Although, since independence, governments have put in many efforts to provide the villages with basic infrastructure facilities. Still a preoccupation with accessibility to all good things accumulated at one place makes it all the more an alluring place to settle

down and thus the equilibrium tried to goes in vain. Be it education, or eking a living, villages have always been the secondary choice for many a population. The myriad ways in which fiction portrays cities and villages is the core of this paper and it'll try to bring out the commonness of suffering, pitiable misery and countless daily woes the characters undergo in both the settings in which the characters are positioned.

A slew of illustrious examples from the fiction, *The White Tiger* gives a sardonic overview of the kind of villages is India constituted of. The aim of the paper is nevertheless to bring out the inhumane situations the characters grapple with whether located in a village setting or elsewhere in the world. The cause of misery, pain, disillusionment caused are but a part of the psyche envisioned by the writers who visualize their country from afar. Now,

here we can agree of what is said about Diaspora writers. To give a non-biased touch to the writings one has to be on a non-linear platform. In the fiction, *The White Tiger*, the author says:

Laxmangarh, has a market consisting of "three or more identical shops selling more or less identically adulterated and stale items of rice, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, cigarettes, and jaggery" (24).

Balram informs the readers that on the paper it is shown that, Laxmangarh is typical Indian village paradise but in reality, it posits a grim picture in contrast.

In reality, however, electricity poles in the village are "defunct"; water taps are "broken"; and children are "too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India" (39).

The life of the people living in Laxmangarh who are reeling under the debt of the landlords is narrated as:

'The people of Laxmangarh live in perpetual servitude to the four landlords, called the Buffalo, the Stork, the Rayen and the Wild Boar...The landlords of Laxmangarh are, in turn, exploited by the Great Socialist whenever elections are due on the pretext of saving them from their illegal trading and operations. The Great Socialist, rigs the elections and extorts money from the four Animals ruling Laxmangarh'.

Nothing seems to good in the education area too. Another instance of corruption is so evident from the illustration given below:

..."There is no duster in this class; there are no chairs; there are no uniforms for the boys. How much money have you stolen from the school funds, you sister-fucker?" Krishna cowers by his side and keeps saying "Sorry sir, sorry sir." (56)

The fact that corruption has dribbled into people's

souls is evident from the condition of the decrepit government hospital where Balram and his elder brother take their father, Vikram the rickshaw-puller, for treatment when he starts vomiting blood. There are three black goats sitting on the steps to the large, faded white building; the stench of goat feces wafts out of the open door.

A couple of Muslim men have spread a newspaper on the ground. One of them has an open wound on his leg. He invites the sons and their father to sit there; Kishan and Balram lower their father on the newspaper sheets. Two girls come with yellow eyes and start blaming each other jaundice.

On bribing the higher authorities, the doctors who are to be accountable for the Government hospital are permitted to work in a private hospital while their presence in the government hospitals is regularly marked in the ledger. On paper, the doctor on duty in the Laxmangarh hospital has already treated the Muslim's wounded leg, Vikram's tuberculosis, and the girls' jaundice. In the evening, Balram's father is "permanently cured of his tuberculosis" in the government ledger.

And thus, the author sarcastically portrays the working of the hospital.

This is "the typical Indian village paradise", (99). Balram tells us sardonically

Nothing less than what is depicted in the novel bares open the sordid atmosphere once prevalent in the village lives. One can wonder how then an average being would survive such daily ordeals and the wrath, opportunism of a corrupted world around. and thus, in search for a greener pasture Populaire/s end up in towns, cities and metropolis. A psyche oriented to better standards of living leaves them in a lurch as even as it seems fate leaves them afflicting.

Cities as they are known for the recognition for innovations, creativity, assimilation of cultures play a multifaceted purpose in all societies across geographical boundaries. They are the core of technological development and economic growth of many nations, while at the same time serving as a breeding ground for poverty, inequality,

environmental hazards, and transmissible diseases. The influx leads to vulnerability of all migrants to circulating infectious diseases and the potential to establish an urban transmission cycle. Further, most urban poor live in slums that are unfettered, have choked conditions, are overloaded, are placed near open sewers, and restricted to geographically dangerous areas such as hillsides, riverbanks, and water basins subject to landslides, flooding, or industrial hazards. The novel *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry exhibits the pitiable conditions that these cities provide to the migrants from villages.

Slums which are considered to be eyesores of any metropolis, are an integral part of all cities. *A Fine Balance*, by Rohinton Mistry provides an indication of a slum when the train carrying Ishwar and Om and Maneck Kohlah enters 'City by the Sea'. As the train slows down to a crawl, Om looks out of the window to see that the train has stopped, in front of the row of shacks behind the railway fence, "alongside a ditch running with raw sewage". Children are playing a game with sticks and stones, with an excited puppy dancing around them. Nearby, a shirtless man is milking a cow. The acrid smell of a dung-fire drifts towards the train. "They could have been anywhere." (37)

When they start working for Dina Dalai as tailors, Ishwar and Om move to a regular slum when they hire a shanty from the slum landlord Navalkar. Om detests the place but Ishwar assures him that they are there only for a short while. As soon as they have saved enough money, they would go back to their village. But one wonders with such pitiable situations when would they both go back to their village. as of now the city seems to suck them as it has done with several other thousands of migrant labours.

Living conditions become more difficult and miserable with the onset of monsoons. The roof of the tailors' shack starts leaking; they can hardly sleep. Rajaram helps them again by spreading a plastic sheet over the leaking area. As though the ongoing troubles were less one fine morning all the slum dwellers are forced to board the waiting buses through threats of eviction for a "free" ride to see their "beloved" Prime Minister. Rajaram, who has

been to such rallies earlier, is sarcastic, others are disinterested for they fear losing a day's wages, but they were left with no choice. When the speeches were over, people rushed to the refreshment booths allotted to them for "free" snacks which soon ran short. They were paid four rupees per family instead of the five promised per head as a rupee has been deducted as bus fare. What is worse in offing was that the buses dropped them halfway to their dwellings and they had to slog the way back home.

But their life in the slum seemed very short as it was razed to the ground and its inhabitants were transported to a work camp on an irrigation project. They were engaged there as labourers breaking stones, and paid arbitrary wages, and given sub-standard food. As more people were brought in, several workers were laid off and the wage bill manipulated. In such inhuman conditions and manipulation Ishwar and Om find their way through the recommendation of a crippled beggar Shankar; they shelter themselves under Beggar master's protection and pay him fifty rupees each per week for a year to remain out of trouble.

However, they manage to find a sleeping place for the night but as though fate was driven to never cease their troubles the police raided the streets and all the people sleeping were shelter less again and that too in the name of Beautification. Ishwar and Om became shelter less again. It left a permanent scar on their psyche but that is the fate of all the poor in the City by the Sea. Thus, the migration from a village to city does not bring much change in the life of the poor.

Losing hope of better conditions after migration from village to city, the people from the new generation prefer immigration to the countries supposed to have a developed economy where every individual can have a better life. However, these are mere illusions and change of country does not bring much change in the suffering and struggle which an immigrant undergoes. This is well elucidated in the work of Kiran Desai, titled, *The Inheritance of Loss* through the sufferings of Biju, the cook's son. Biju characterizes the dilemma of thousands of illegal immigrants from the third world countries to the United States. He is sent to America

by his father, the cook of a retired judge so that he can avoid the servitude that his father has suffered all his life.

Biju drifts from one job to another in the basement kitchens of New York as a cook-cum-waiter-cum odd-job man and works at several restaurants serving exotic French, Colonial and other foods. While working in these restaurants he comes across co-workers from several other third world countries. He is surprised to learn that Indians are residing and working in all parts of the world—Guatemala, Guyana, Guam, Trinidad, Madagascar, Chile, Kenya, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Fiji, New Zealand, Surinam, Canada, Alaska, the North Pole, Hong Kong, Singapore, England, Dubai, Kuwait and other places Biju hasn't even heard the existence of. They have all gone there in search of a better life and job opportunities.

Biju lives in the basement of a building under subhuman conditions with several other illegal immigrants, who all lead an "invisible" and anonymous existence in New York. All of them desire to obtain the coveted green cards that would enable them to lead a life of dignity in America, but only a few succeed. Biju's last job is at Gandhi Cafe run by Harish-Harry and his dysfunctional family. He is made to work for fifteen to seventeen hours a day on less than minimum wages and, as a favor, allowed to live rent free in the basement kitchen of Gandhi Cafe. He and his co-workers sleep on the floor, on the restaurant tables with table clothes as blankets, their only extra earnings being the tips they get from poor Indian students and "untenured" professors who visit the cafe mostly at lunch.

When one day Biju slips and fractures his leg and asks his employer, Harish-Harry, for medical attention, he is bluntly told that medical care was very expensive in America and that Biju is a faceless illegal immigrant with no legal papers. Instead, he is advised to go home, get treated, rest, and return to America. On his return, he is robbed on way from Siliguri to Kalimpong of all his belongings and in the end, we have a tearful reunion between the demented father and the destitute son.

The trajectory of characters from village to cities and cities to metros has done no good at least

for them to live a dignified life. Whatsoever the authors of the fiction placed their characters in varied locations but at the end of it, one can feel the realm of the afflictions, the misery and pain these characters underwent. So, much so Balram turns out to be a criminal in the making to free himself from all the darkness he talks about and concludes to be in the India that is light by resisting the life of darkness and killing Ashok. The difference between Laxmangarh and Bangalore is well argued by Balram and his choice seemed to have his control on his destiny. Morals and ethics don't move Balram. However, emancipating it might be for Balram, but for the readers it's a migrant from a country turning into a criminal just because of the situations he had been through. The chandelier which embodies Balram's transformation into a man literally, represents the acquisitive accomplishment which he has encountered in his entrepreneurial ventures as an sovereign businessman. Symbolically, it sheds light on him, amidst the Darkness still prevalent in the everyday life of India. It represents Balram's escape from the presence of Darkness which used to dominate his life. By killing Ashok, Balram becomes his own man, freeing himself from bondage and entering a life of independence.

It becomes clear that Rohinton Mistry's 'Fine Balance' is not the balancing of the binaries; justice and injustice, of good and evil, or of love and hatred. It does not attempt to portray life as reasonable state in which these opposites weigh against each other. We tend to absorb that this balance is a state of mind, of measuring positivity and optimism against misery. If joy can manifest itself in the most repugnant of circumstances, then personal suffering can always be balanced against acceptance – and eventually defiance – of one's own condition.

The Inheritance of Loss gave the impression and promise to take the readers somewhere in this globalised confusion of identity, motive, routine, unrealised dreams and intangible desires, but eventually it seemed to have nothing to add to what has been started off at the beginning. All the three fictional writings with different characters in various settings and circumstances only made me as reader accept the fact that unless one is eager to work on

the atmosphere surrounding him, nothing in this world can rescue even if it is the most promising land on the earth. Much remains to be researched in terms of the pitiable conditions by applying many theories to comprehend but it was a soulful attempt to bring out objectively the fates of characters in comparison of those many whose lives were no less miserable during the pandemic times.

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