The White Tiger Study Guide

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The novel starts as Balram starts a letter to a Chinese politician about to visit India. In the letter, written from an apartment in Bangalore lit by a large (and somewhat unexpected) chandelier, Balram describes himself as India's most successful entrepreneur, and begins to tell the story of how he got that way. As the novel continues, narration returns to this setting, framing Balram's story of his past with brief references to his successful present.

Balram begins the journey into his past by describing his early life in the village of Laxmangarh, a small community pervaded by poverty. His family is dominated by a forceful grandmother, fed as the result of the income generated by a hard-working (but badly paid) father, and trapped in their way of life by India's centuries-old caste system, which defines individuals by the jobs done by ancient ancestors. Very early on, however, Balram comes to realize and/or believe that the life for which he seems to be destined is not the life he wants and/or needs to live, and slowly, carefully, starts working his way towards greater wealth and success. He doesn't really know how he's going to get there: he only knows that he has to, and trusts that the way forward will ultimately be revealed to him.

From Laxmangarh, Balram moves on to Dhanbad, where he manages to get himself some training as a driver and then a job as assistant chauffeur in a wealthy family of industrialist businessman headed by a man referred to only as The Stork. The Stork's two sons are very different men: the elder, Mukesh Sir, is smart, domineering, and homely; the younger, Mr. Ashok, is less intelligent, more soft-hearted, and physically very attractive. Mr. Ashok is married to the similarly attractive Pinky Madam. As his time with the family lengthens, and by deliberate and carefully calculated action, Balram makes himself indispensable, eventually making himself head chauffeur and accompanying Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam on their move into Delhi.

Balram watches, listens, and learns as Mr. Ashok and Mukesh Sir become more and more involved in the financial and social manipulations of the entwined business and political systems in Delhi; observes and absorbs as Mr. Ashok struggles to keep his marriage together; and finds himself caught in a typical Indian servant's trap when circumstances force him to take the blame for a crime he didn't commit. The consequences of his actions in this case don't come to pass: he avoids prison, but his life is disturbed anyway when Pinky Madam, who has long been frustrated with her husband, returns to her home in America.

This sends Mr. Ashok into an emotional spiral, which results in him becoming increasingly dependent on Balram who, in turn, becomes increasingly resentful. That resentment builds and intensifies until Balram is driven to kill Mr. Ashok, steal a large sum of money intended to be used as bribes for corrupt politicians, and leave the city.

Balram eventually ends up in Bangalore, where he sets up a business for himself (using the money stolen from Mr. Ashok as seed money) and, finally, becoming the successful,

independent, wealthy businessman he has always dreamed of being. He is haunted by a quiet sense of guilt, but presents himself as ultimately free of remorse for what he did: he concludes his story with a celebration, in narration, of the fact that he has been, even if only for a short period of time, a servant to no one.

Section 1

Summary

“The First Night” Balram’s narration begins in the form of a memo being written to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, in the immediate aftermath (within five minutes) of Balram hearing on the radio that Jiabao is coming to India. Balram comments on his belief that Jiabao is coming to learn about India’s entrepreneurs, of which, Balram says, India has plenty. He also says that he is one of the most successful entrepreneurs in India, adding that he has decided to tell Jiabao his story, which will reveal more about what it takes to be an entrepreneur than any of the cheap books he (Balram) says that Jiabao can get on the street. Balram then describes the room from which he is writing (a small office with its own large chandelier, in the city of Bangalore), and talks about how he was taught, by the wife of “the late Mr. Ashok” that some things need to be said in English. Among those things, Balram says, is the phrase “What a fucking joke.”

Balram begins his tale with a description of an encounter he had with his ex-employer Mr. Ashok and his employer’s wife, Pinky Madam (who, Balram adds, made him breathe fast every time she spoke). The encounter, Balram says, took place while he was chauffeuring Ashok and Pinky Madam, and focused on Ashok’s dismay that uneducated people like Balram were running the country. Balram comments on how the best entrepreneurs come from backgrounds like his, and begins the narration of his origins, using as a reference a wanted poster that at one point, he says, was published and displayed all over India. As he goes component-by-component through the poster, he recalls the traumatizing death and funeral of his mother (the first occasion in his life, he says, that he fainted); the similarly traumatizing experience of being forced to look into the face of a lizard (because he’s terrified of lizards: it was the second time in his life, he says, that he fainted); and his relationship with his father (poor, but ambitious for his son to be a success), his controlling grandmother, Kusum, and his manipulative brother, Kishan. He comments on the relative poverty of his family, and describes how, after proving himself to be the cleverest student in his class, an inspector gave him the nickname “White Tiger” (after a very rare animal), which was his third name. His first was Munna, which was given to him by his father and just means “boy”; the second was Balram, given to him by a schoolmaster and designed to distinguish him from another boy, named Ram.

Balram also refers, in relation to his commentary on the poster, to a red canvas bag the poster described him as carrying, a bag carrying several thousand rupees. He then describes, with some bitterness and jabs of sharp humor, his childhood in the remote, poverty-stricken village of Laxmangarh (part of the area known as The Darkness around the Ganga river); how the town was run by a trio of landlords, each given nicknames inspired by animals (including “The Stork”); describes how he was taken out of school to do often hard, manual labor in a tea shop; and how, when he was a child, he dreamed of going into the Black Fort which was near Laxmangarh. He describes how, in his first attempt, he was frightened away, but then later, as a young adult, he got into the Fort

(which by this time was quite run down); looked down at the countryside (which he describes as “the most beautiful sight on earth”); and then spat in the direction of his village. “Eight months later,” he says, he “slit Mr. Ashok’s throat.”

Analysis

As this first section introduces the novel’s central character, protagonist, and narrator (Balram), it also introduces several of its key themes: its exploration, or rather Balram’s exploration, of the nature of entrepreneurship; and its metaphoric comparisons of the relative values of Light and Dark, manifest here in the reference to his chandelier and his home village. This, in turn, relates to two of the book’s other key themes, also introduced here: wealth vs. poverty, and freedom vs. solitude. Here and throughout the work, light represents success, happiness, and wealth, while darkness represents servitude, misery and poverty.

Other important elements to note include the relationship between the framing narrative (i.e. Balram in the present – that is, in his chandelier-lit apartment in Bangalore) and the main narrative (i.e. Balram’s life in the more distant past – that is, his childhood in Laxmangarh – juxtaposed with his life in the more recent past – that is, his relationship with Mr. Ashok). There is the sense here that in the present, both areas of his past are equally accessible and equally relevant to Balram’s explanation of how he got to where he is. This explanation functions on a couple of levels: consciously for Balram, it serves as the main content of the letter to Jiabao (a letter that, in all likelihood, will never be read) but which, as the narration will eventually suggest, is actually a kind of confession with a different, non-self-promotional, intention.

This section also introduces important objects / motifs (i.e. repeated images) that recur later in the narrative. These include the quote from Pinky Madam (“What a fucking joke!”); the wanted poster (the meaning of which is perhaps suggested at the end of the chapter, by Balram’s comment about what happened to Mr. Ashok); and the reference to the name “White Tiger” (a term that recurs later in the narrative, playing an important role in its climax). Other elements in appearing here that foreshadow later events include the reference to the red canvas bag (which appears several times later in the action); the thousands of rupees contained in the bag (which, like the bag itself, plays a role in defining and motivating the book’s climax); the two descriptions of fainting (a third faint occurs at a key point in the story later on); and the chapter’s final line. This last functions on two levels: to hook and/or draw the reader into the next chapter (and arguably the remainder of the book) and also to foreshadow the events of the book’s climax.

Discussion Question 1

As it introduces the theme of the nature of entrepreneurship, what is the impression of that particular aspect of business that Balram’s initial comments suggest or imply? What is he saying about entrepreneurship in what he says in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What is the most likely reason that Balram spits in the direction of his village while at The Black Fort?

Discussion Question 3

Given that the story is, on some level, about a man reinventing himself and his life, what do you think is the significance of Balram having three different names?

Vocabulary

excellency, reliable, entrepreneur, protocol, sandalwood, admiration, enlightenment, venerate, blasphemous, reverent, Namaste, statutory, entrust, emancipation, sadhu, saffron, garland, pyre, adulterate, foist, nutritious, pompous, defunct, stupendous, winnow, millipede, extricate, rickshaw, disgorge, peculiarity, clavicle, cowardice, guava, expectorate, acrid, legitimate, safari, discoloration, vivacious, infallible, hooch, lavish, dowry, prerogative, corrode, rampart, reincarnate

Section 2

Summary

“The Second Night”, Part 1 - p. 37 – 61. Balram begins the second part of his letter to Premier Jiabao by describing how devoted to Mr. Ashok he was; how physically attractive both Mr. Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam, were; and how he (Balram) picked up a lot of knowledge, including his knowledge of English, from them. He describes feeling “sentimental” about Mr. Ashok, in spite of having murdered him, and comments on how murdering a man gives someone a uniquely intimate knowledge of him. Balram describes how, after the sudden and humiliating death of his father from tuberculosis, he and his brother Kishan moved to Dhanbad, a town where they could both get work. Balram says he was particularly glad to move because he had developed a reputation in Laxmanarh as more of a snoop and a watcher than a worker. He says he first got a job at a tea shop, similar to the one in Laxmanarh, but then realized there were more opportunities to be had, and decided to become an entrepreneur. He describes how he bribed his way into driving lessons; how he was rewarded for being a successful pupil by being taken to a prostitute; how he eventually went door-to-door in search of a job, but had no success; and how he managed to get close to a job driving for Mr. Ashok after encountering his father – The Stork, the landlord from Laxmanarh.

Balram describes how his acquisition of the job depended on which caste he was from – and then describes the history, concept and practice of “caste”, an aspect of Indian culture that sets an identity on an individual, and then onto his family, for generations. He describes how the caste system was broken down after the British left India in 1947, and how the system then evolved into “just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat – or get eaten up.”

Balram then describes how he convinced The Stork and his elder son, Mukesh Sir, that he was a lower caste and a good sweet-maker (which was, according to his name/caste, what he was born to do). After the bullying, very successful Mukesh Sir checks on Balram’s family, and then Balram is finally given a job, commenting in narration that in India, it’s important for an employer to know everything about an employee’s family so that, in essence, the employee can be fully controlled. Balram goes on to describe how he was the second driver in the household, of the smaller, less sophisticated car (the primary driver, of the more up-to-date car, was the surly Ram Persad); and how, as the second driver, he was basically treated like any other servant. He was also, he says, given the job of helping The Stork take care of his bad legs, helping him bathe and massaging him. Balram describes some of the conversations he overheard while massaging The Stork’s legs; comments on how Mr. Ashok became upset when either his father or brother hit him; also comments on how Pinky Madam never joined in conversations between the men; and how difficult it tended to be to get the “Old Man” smell of The Stork off his hands at the end of the day.

Analysis

This section introduces and develops a key aspect of Balram's character: his capacity for watching, listening, and learning. This, in turn, also has thematic implications, in that Balram believes that being able to do all these things increases his likelihood to be a successful entrepreneur, and also increases his chances of breaking out of poverty/servitude and into a life of freedom/wealth. Meanwhile, the theme of entrepreneurship is also developed as Balram takes charge of his life, makes important career and education choices, and in general takes as much initiative as a servant can in defining his life and/or income and/or future. Continuing the development of the entrepreneurship theme, the narrative suggests that these are all arguably important qualities in entrepreneurship in general, not just the unique (and somewhat perverse) view, held by the novel's murderous protagonist, of what it takes to be a successful entrepreneur.

Other significant elements in this section include the first appearance of Ram Persad (a character who, inadvertently, plays an important role in Balram's personal and/or career advancement in future sections); the references to Pinky Madam's relative silence when she's around her husband and his brother (which foreshadows further disintegrative elements in their relationship later in the book); and the reference to how Balram is expected to take care of The Stork's legs and feet. This last foreshadows a key moment later in the narrative, when while once again taking care of The Stork, Balram learns that a potentially troubling situation for him has been averted. There is also the sense, in the closing lines of the chapter, that the "old man smell" to which Balram refers can have several metaphoric meanings: the "smell" of corruption (which becomes more present as the narrative progresses", the "smell" of arrogance and status (which can be seen as affecting everyone in the stork's family), and the "smell" of ruthlessness, of which Balram comes close to being a victim in later sections of the book. Finally, this section also continues the interplay of present, distant past, and recent past, weaving all three elements of time together into the narrative and, in doing so, demonstrates how there is really no such thing as clear separation between past and present.

Discussion Question 1

What are the different ways in which the value of family is explored or commented on in this section?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Balram's comment about there really only being two castes in India develop the novel's various themes?

Discussion Question 3

In many ways, the caste system (at least as described here) resembles several other systems of class and/or racial distinction in many other parts of the world. What is the point of such systems? Where do they come from? How do they emerge? What do they serve?

Vocabulary

rictus, eavesdrop, stench, feces, inaugurate, jaundice, delirious, convulse, tuberculosis, vitiligo, remuneration, hookah, aggression, jeer, eunuch, serf, ferocious, betel, consign, inquisitive, spittoon

Section 3

Summary

“The Second Night”, Part 2 - pp. 62 – 95. As Balram continues the story of his time working for The Stork, he talks about a regular errand he did: buying imported British liquor for The Stork and his sons. He also describes how different The Stork’s two sons, Mukesh Sir and Mr. Ashok, were – the former unattractive but smart, the latter very attractive, rather stupid, and very American in his ways. Balram describes how, at one point, he was assigned to drive Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam back to Lasmangarh, where Ashok was born. Excited to be going back home while driving an expensive car (even it belonged to his employers, and even if it was only their second best car), Balram describes being intrigued by the argument between Ashok and Pinky Madam during the trip (about Mr. Ashok would follow through on his plans to return to America) and in which Pinky Madam uses the phrase “What a fucking joke.”

Back in Lasmangarh, Ashok and Pinky Madam are entertained by one of the area’s other powerful landlords, the one nicknamed The Wild Boar (they eat dinner, Balram says, in a dining room in which there is a large chandelier). Balram is allowed to spend time with his family, and is shocked to see how much Kishan is being treated in the same way as their father was, feeling that he (Kishan) will die the same way – in a crowded, filthy hospital, of tuberculosis. His anger at this situation is part of the reason why, after a lavish dinner and party, Balram loses his temper with Kisum, who is making plans for his marriage. He shouts that he doesn’t want to marry, storms out, and heads for the Black Fort.

Back in the present, as he continues his letter, under the light of his chandelier, Balram recalls a poem written by one of his four favorite Indian (Muslim) poets, a poem in which God asks The Devil (who, according to Muslims, was once God’s “sidekick”) to become his servant again. In the poem, Balram says, The Devil just laughs. Balram then, in present tense narration, describes how, when he thinks of this poem, he sees himself climbing up to the Black Fort, a “small black man in [a] wet khaki uniform”, shaking with anger at God, spitting at God again and again. In narration, Balram then comments on how the spinning blades of a small fan “slice the light from the chandelier again and again”.

Following his visit to the fort, Balram returns to the home of The Wild Boar and collects Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam. As he drives them out of town, he sees his angry and upset family gathered by the side of the road, but ignores them. On their way back to Dhanbad, Ashok explains to Pinky Madam that he likes life in India, with its servants and status, too much to ever go back to America. Eventually, Balram and his passengers find that the way into Dhanbad is blocked by a political demonstration. This leads Balram to comment that it’s time to explain to Premier Jiabao about democracy in India … but it’s too late in the evening / too early in the morning for him to do so.

Analysis

The first element to note about this section is the reference to Balram's job of buying European liquor for his employers, an aspect of his work that continually recurs throughout his time with Mr. Ashok and his family and which, on every occasion it appears (including this one), foreshadows the role that a bottle of European alcohol plays in the novel's climax. The second point to note is the trip taken back to Laxmangarh, which is important for several reasons: it includes another reference to one of the book's key symbols; it confirms, for Balram, that he is making the right decisions about moving ahead with his life (that is, away from the life he left behind); it increases his determination to not have his life end in the same way as his father's did; and it foreshadows how, later in the narrative, Kusum continues her attempts to manipulate and/or control her grandson. Meanwhile, Balram's description of the return from Laxmangarh introduces a new narrative element (politics) and foreshadows key developments in that element later in the narrative.

This section also includes important developments in the novel's thematic considerations of family (in terms of both Balram's family and that of his employers) and of freedom and wealth vs. servitude and poverty (both manifested in Balram's relationships with his family, and his increasing determination to move away from them). There is also an important piece of foreshadowing in Balram's reference to poetry, which foreshadows how, later in the narrative, a piece of poetry provides a key element of inspiration for Balram to finally take the ultimate step towards realizing his ambitions for freedom and wealth. Then: it's important to note that Balram is allowed to drive only the family's second best car, an aspect of his servitude that he resents and is desperate to change, finally getting a chance to do so in the following section. Finally, the description of Balram's family by the side of the road foreshadows a similar situation later in the narrative (Section 5) which affects Balram in rather a different way than the encounter here.

Discussion Question 1

How is the light vs. dark theme developed in this section? What symbol of light appears here, and how does it reflect, ironically or otherwise, the action of the scene(s) in which it appears?

Discussion Question 2

What is the relationship between the poem referred to in this section and the story's plot? Its themes?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Balram spit at God at The Black Fort?

Vocabulary

loiter, dubious, ancestral, guerilla, kerosene, piety, degenerate

Section 4

Summary

“The Fourth Morning” Balram begins his discussion and analysis of democracy with a story of an election that took place in The Darkness while he was still living and working in Laxmangarh. It was an election in which a political leader he refers to as The Great Socialist, known to be corrupt and devious, was being challenged by The Four Landlords, a quartet of wealthy landowners including The Stork and The Wild Boar. Balram describes the people talking about the election as “eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra” – that is, until The Great Socialist and The Four Landlords strike some kind of deal, giving The Great Socialist the election. Balram then describes how one man was determined to vote despite the deal (i.e. the predetermined outcome), and how he was beaten to death by the police, who had been joined by Vijay, an ambitious bus conductor whom Balram had long idolized. Balram offers the comment “What a fucking joke”.

Balram then describes how, some time later when he was living and working in Dhanbad with The Stork and his family, the house was visited by The Great Socialist. Balram watches and listens as the politician manipulates The Stork and his two sons into doing exactly what he wanted, learning that The Stork and his family are making money illegally from coal mining. In the aftermath of The Socialist’s visit, the family agrees to send Ashok and Pinky Madam into New Delhi to start making new connections and new successes there. Desperate to move with them into the city, Balram pleads with a senior servant to be allowed to be their driver, but the servant refuses, indicating that he would accept a bribe in an amount that Balram cannot possibly raise.

Despairing, Balram wonders what to do – but then he notices that Ram Persad is behaving oddly. One day, Balram follows him when he leaves the house, and discovers that he is going to a mosque: Persad is, Balram discovers, a Muslim pretending to be a Hindu in order to keep his job. Balram reveals his discovery to the senior servant, and Ram Persad leaves the family’s employ soon after. This, in turn, leaves Balram the only driver on staff, and therefore the only person who can go with Mukesh Sir, Ashok and Pinky Madam into New Delhi.

On the day of the departure, Balram excitedly drives the family’s best car (a Honda City), along with its three passengers, into New Delhi. He describes how he seemed to know exactly what Ashok wanted him to do; how Ashok drove for a while, but soon gave the wheel back to Balram because it felt “weird”; and how they arrived in Delhi “late at night.” Balram then says, addressing Premier Jiabao, that even now, he doesn’t quite know how his feelings for Ashok changed from deference to murder; and that, when he writes again, he will “turn the chandelier up a bit. The story gets much darker from here.”

Analysis

This section continues the development of the novel's exploration of politics in India, juxtaposing and entwining commentary on India's political system with other elements of plot and theme. There is the sense, for example, that for Balram, politics is part of the darkness that he is trying to move away from as he sees and senses that while politicians claim to speak and act for the poor, they are really motivated by cultivating beneficial, profitable relationships with the wealthy. Meanwhile, this chapter's reference to The Great Socialist foreshadows events later in the narrative in which he (and also Vijay, referred to here) play significant roles in the events leading up to Balram's killing of Mr. Ashok (which is arguably also foreshadowed by the beating received by the politically active peasant). Finally, there is the reference to the eunuch and the Kama Sutra.

Also in this chapter, Balram again demonstrates his entrepreneurial skills and attitudes as he manipulates his way into the driver's job, manifesting the novel's thematically-central interest in the nature of entrepreneurship at the same time as it develops the freedom and wealth vs. poverty and servitude themes. The move to Delhi, for Balram, represents a big step towards realizing his goals of independence, wealth, and success, a change in situation metaphorically manifested by his opportunity to drive the Honda City, an important symbol, for him and the novel, of success. There are also developments in the dark/light theme, with the reference at the end of the chapter to the chandelier and to the impending darkening of Balram's story. Finally, there is a key piece of foreshadowing: Mr. Ashok's temporary taking of the Honda City's wheel, foreshadows events in Section 6, where someone else takes the wheel of the car, but with much more disastrous consequences.

Discussion Question 1

Given that "eunuch" is the term for a man who can no longer sexually function following the removal of his testicles, and given that the Kama Sutra is an ancient Indian manual of sexual positions, what do you think Balram is saying with his comment about Indian men discussing politics?

Discussion Question 2

In what way do the events of this section manifest the book's thematic interest in freedom vs. servitude?

Discussion Question 3

What do the developments in the book's exploration of politics in India suggest about the author's attitude towards politics? Is the author's attitude different from Balram's, do you think? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

formality, splendor, spectacle, franchise, illiterate, stencil, larceny, embezzle, cholera, dissuade, simper, loiter, grille, Ramadan, entrails

Section 5

Summary

“The Fourth Night”, Part 1, pp. 97 – 128. As he resumes his letter to Premier Jiabao, Balram begins with commentary about the chandeliers he has in his apartment, revealing that he is a man in “hiding” and that he finds a lot of humor in the fact that he’s supposed to be hidden, but is surrounded by light. He also says that looking at a chandelier helps him remember things. He then resumes his story, continuing with a description of how he, Ashok, and Pinky Madam began their lives in Delhi. He describes the living arrangements (the family upstairs in a luxurious apartment in a modern part of the city; him downstairs, in a concrete cellar with all the other servants of all the other families); and a conversation with someone who becomes an unexpected ally – a driver, unnamed by the narration, who suffers from vitiligo, an apparently common disease amongst the working castes of India in which there is no pigment in the sufferer’s skin, leaving pink patches in otherwise brown complexions.

Balram then describes how he and other drivers are left alone in their cars for hours at a time (many of them keeping themselves occupied by reading a magazine called “Murder Weekly”); how it seemed that Mukesh Sir (who is always finding fault with Balram) and Mr. Ashok (who is always on Balram’s side) seem to be constantly busy; and how, in the aftermath of a meeting with an important government official and as they’re driving past a statue of Gandhi, Mr. Ashok indicates that he’s disgusted with himself for having offered a politician a bribe. On the way home, Balram and his passengers encounter a massive traffic jam. Balram describes a large number of beggars on the side of the road, imagines that his father might have been one of them, and finds himself identifying with and understanding them. When Balram and the others get home, Mukesh Sir bullies and humiliates him into searching for a lost coin. When Mr. Ashok is unable to calm his brother down, Balram pulls out a coin from his own pocket, says it’s the coin he was looking for, and apologizes for not finding it sooner. In the apartment, Pinky Madam goes to bed by herself, and without much of a greeting to her husband. Ashok is left alone, and Balram catches him almost in tears.

Shortly afterwards, Balram says in narration, Mukesh Sir was sent back to Dhanbad, leaving the family’s apartment to Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam. Tensions between Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam intensify, with Balram watching carefully to make sure he knows where he stands. He also makes more effort to improve his appearance: brushing his teeth, changing some of what Pinky Madam sees as his ruder behaviors, and, the whole while, mentally berating his father for not teaching him how to be more sophisticated. Also at this time, Balram notices how morally and emotionally weak Mr. Ashok is, letting himself be manipulated and bullied by his wife.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is its exploration, as the section begins, of the Light/Darkness theme, represented here, as it is several times throughout the narrative, by the chandelier. There is the sense here that the darkness represents a perhaps paradoxical entwining of safety and corruption, and that the light represents a similarly paradoxical entwining of success and danger. Then there is the introduction of a new character, The Diseased Driver, who plays key roles in Balram's story throughout the remainder of the narrative. Also significant: Balram's encounter with the beggars by the side of the road, a clear echo of what happened to him as he was leaving his family's village in Section 3 but also a clear contrast: where the earlier encounter fueled his resentment, the encounter here fuels his determination.

Meanwhile, there are developments in the book's narrative interest in politics; a metaphoric representation of the wealth vs. poverty theme; and a fairly literal indication of Balram's determination to improve his life (i.e. in his decision to take better physical care of himself). Another fairly literal representation of Balram's situation shows up in the description of his living arrangements: specifically, living in the cockroach-infested cellar of the otherwise luxurious building in which his employers live, their upper apartment reflecting their upper-level status while his lower-level room reflects his lower level of status. Then there is the reference to Gandhi, one of several points in the narrative in which the juxtaposition of this honest, morally inspiring leader is ironically, and tellingly, juxtaposed with an image of corruption and double dealing. Finally, there is the reference to "Murder Weekly", a blackly ironic echoing of Balram's comment at the end of Section 1 about having killed Mr. Ashok, and a simultaneous foreshadowing of the revelation of how that killing happened later in the narrative.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways might the physical deformity of The Diseased Driver mirror, or reflect, inner or psychological aspects of Balram's personality?

Discussion Question 2

How does the wealth vs. poverty theme actively define elements of plot in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What is the most likely explanation for, at the end of this section, Mr. Ashok being in tears?

Vocabulary

bullock, cretin, garroted, dormitory, flimsy, continuous, scimitar, gruel

Section 6

Summary

“The Fourth Night”, Part 2 - pp. 128 – 145. At one point, Balram takes Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam to the shopping mall, and notices that Mr. Ashok comes out wearing a particular kind of T-shirt. Balram also notices that people in sandals (i.e. poorer people) are not allowed into the mall. This, Balram says, led him to a dangerous experiment: he purchases a T-shirt of the sort worn by Mr. Ashok and, wearing the T-shirt and a pair of shoes, manages to get into the mall and have a look around. He makes it back to the car before Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam, both exhilarated and angered at the wealth and waste he found there.

Some time later, on the day of Pinky Madam’s birthday, Ashok gets Balrato to dress as a maharajah (i.e. Indian prince), and serve dinner to him and Pinky Madam, who go out for drinks and dancing afterwards, Balram still wearing the costume as he drives them. He waits for hours while they’re in the club, and when they finally come out, they are quite drunk. As Balram drives them home, Pinky Madam insists upon driving. Balram gets out, and is abandoned as the car, driven by Pinky Madam, speeds away. As he’s starting to walk home, however, he’s startled to see the car returning at top speed, stopping just a foot or two away from him. He climbs back in, despite his anger and fear responding respectfully to the hysterical laughter of Pinky Madam, and the quieter laughter of Mr. Ashok.

As Pinky Madam races home, she hits and runs over something that she at first thinks is an animal of some kind, but later realizes was a small child. Back at the apartment, Balram tries to convince Ashok that nobody will notice that a child from that area (i.e. poor and unnoticed) has gone missing. A few days later, Balram is called into the apartment, where Mukesh Sir has returned. Balram is asked to read and sign a paper stating that he was driving the night of the accident; that he was alone in the car; and that he takes full responsibility for what happened. Mukesh Sir tells him that he (Mukesh) has informed Balram’s family of the situation, telling them that by signing the paper Balram will be doing a good turn for the family that hired him and adding that Kusum is perfectly happy with the situation. Balram realizes that his family will be hurt, if not destroyed, if he doesn’t do as Mukesh Sir tells him.

Balram, in narration, tells Premier Jiabao to remember that this kind of thing goes on all the time; that he (the Premier) should tell the good people he meets on his visit about what happened, and add that “the jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid, middle-class masters.” He goes on to say, again, “What a fucking joke”; comments that judges are uninterested in the truth once they’ve taken their bribes; and then signs off this night’s letter, without indicating what happened about the letter, and saying that he’s too angry to continue.

Analysis

There are two significant developments in Balram's journey of transformation (that is: his movement from servitude to freedom, as defined by his killing of Mr. Ashok). The first is Balram's posing as a successful, wealthy individual and infiltrating the mall, an event that defines and/or reinforces the idea that it is, in fact, possible to assume a different identity.

The second, and arguably much more significant, is what happens to him as the result of Pinky Madam's hit-and-run accident. This incident shows Balram not only just how little human value he has as a human being to wealthy and influential people (i.e. he is something to be used): it also shows him how little these sorts of people value human life in general. This incident is arguably a key turning point for Balram, making him more determined than ever to become independent, and no longer a servant. Another interesting point about this event is Balram's realization about what will likely happen to his family if he doesn't sign the paper. Here, there is the sense that he will make the choice that saves their lives. One last point about the accident: it foreshadows events in the final section of the book, in which a similar accident leads Balram into circumstances that reveal how morally different he is from the people (i.e. Mr. Ashok and his family) he once served – that is, in some ways … in other ways, again as the final section indicates, he is not in the least bit different.

Discussion Question 1

In what contrasting ways is the "value of family" theme developed in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Balram did the right thing in letting Pinky Madam drive the car? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

By this point in the narrative, the refrain "What a fucking joke!" has been repeated a few times, in a few different circumstances. What is the metaphoric value of this repetition? What are the connections between its various uses? Why, do you think, does Pinky Madam suggest, as Balram reported earlier, that it's one of those phrases best expressed in English?

Vocabulary

crucial, aniseed, corrode, cannonade, ammonia, maharaja, contemptuous, gorge (v.), disgorge, compromise, connoisseur, continuous, discrepancy

Section 7

Summary

“The Fifth Night” This chapter begins with Balram’s extended comparison between the lives of servants like him and the inhabitants of what he calls The Rooster Coop – a chicken factory farm in which both egg producing hens and roosters live in helpless, watchful fear as the other chickens with which they live are slaughtered, their guts remaining on the floor. Balram says the chickens are trapped, and know it, and in spite of their fear, accept their fate. He adds that servants in India are just the same, remaining in their version of The Rooster Coop (i.e. servitude) out of fear that their families will suffer, and/or be killed. He comments that it takes someone like him (i.e. a “White Tiger”) to change life within the human rooster coop without giving in to that fear.

After worrying for several days about what will happen to him when he goes to jail for the hit-and run, Balram nervously responds to a summons to Mr. Ashok’s and Pinky Madam’s apartment, where he discovers that The Stork has arrived. As Balram massages The Stork’s feet and legs, Pinky Madam insists that he (Balram) be told what has happened: it turns out that a contact that the family has in the police department has arranged for Balram not to face charges. Later, after The Stork has returned home and in the middle of the night, Balram is awakened by Pinky Madam and told to drive her to the airport. There, she gives him a brown envelope (which he later discovers holds thousands of rupees) and leaves the country.

In the aftermath of Pinky Madam’s departure, Mr. Ashok loses his temper with Balram and blames him for her going away. Ashok’s anger doesn’t last long, however, and he soon lapses into despair and drunkenness. Balram takes the best care of him that he can, fully aware that there is a new kind of intimacy emerging between them but, at the same time, aware that if he didn’t do what he’s doing, his income would stop. “… where my genuine concern for him ended and where my self-interest began,” he comments in narration, “I could not tell: no servant can ever tell what the motives of his heart are.”

The intimacy between Balram and Mr. Ashok quickly disappears when Mukesh Sir again returns, taking charge of his brother’s life. Mukesh Sir also brings with him a letter from Balram’s grandmother, Kusum, in which she asks him to send more money, to come home, and to reconsider getting married. The next day, Mukesh Sir leaves once again, Balram commenting in narration on how he (Balram) bought Mukesh Sir his favorite snack, but took out the parts he didn’t like and threw then on the ground, where they were eaten by a mouse. As Mukesh Sir leaves, Balram reflects on how getting married would bring him and the family more money (in the form of a dowry from whomever he married) but that ultimately, all his children would end up living in the same kind of servitude that he so desperately wants to move away from. He recalls a moment at his mother’s funeral: when her body was placed on the funeral pyre to be burned, how her foot somehow managed to continue thrusting its way out of the flames. In later narration, Balram reflects on how The Rooster Coop “is guarded from the inside” (i.e. in

India, servants who are unwilling to lose what little life they have making sure that other servants don't rock the boat), but then interrupts his narration because in the present, there is a phone call: an emergency.

Analysis

This section begins with the introduction of one of the narrative's central metaphors: The Rooster Coop. This image represents key aspects of the book's plot (i.e. in that Balram feels that he is trapped in just such a physical and/or psychological "coop, and is struggling to get out) and its themes: the freedom vs. servitude theme, the wealth vs. poverty theme, and the Light vs. Dark theme are all evoked by the image of The Rooster Coop. Here it's also important to note that the image foreshadows not only future references to The Coop later in the book: it also foreshadows a key reference to another type of animal in another type of cage, a circumstance (Section 10) that triggers the book's climax. Another important symbol appears, in this section, for the first and only time in the book: the image of the mouse and the discarded food.

Other important elements in this section include the reference to Balram's freedom, and the concurrent reference to corruption within the police force. This foreshadows revelations in the book's final section of how Balram, once established in his business, again becomes involved with police corruption, but in a different way. Then there is the departure of Pinky Madam, a situation that has been a long time coming, it seems, and which plays a fundamental, defining role in the transformation of the relationship between Mr. Ashok and Balram, a transformation that begins as the chapter progresses and which is marked by a deep ambivalence or confusion on the part of Balram. Meanwhile, the envelope she leaves at her departure – or, more accurately, the money it contains – plays a key role in a later circumstance in the narrative that propels Balram even more strongly towards his determination to live the life of an independent, wealthy, successful man.

Other noteworthy elements include the image of Balram's mother on her funeral pyre (a pyre being a large fire that essentially cremates the dead person placed upon it), the image of the foot suggesting that on some level, in some way, her body is trying to keep moving forward with its life, and therefore inspiring Balram to do the same. Finally, the reference at the end of the chapter to Balram being interrupted, in his apartment in Bangalore from which he's telling the story) by an emergency phone call. The nature of the emergency and the content of the call are revealed in the following section: the implications of both, for Balram's story and his life, are revealed in the novel's final chapter.

Discussion Question 1

What thematic element of the book is metaphorically developed in the image of the mouse eating cast-off food?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss Balram's comment, in narration about the two sides of a servant's heart. Given his character, his situation, and what has happened so far in the story, how do you respond to this comment?

Discussion Question 3

What aspects of Balram's life might be considered equivalent to the fire from which his mother's foot persists in trying to escape?

Vocabulary

jostle, oleaginous, miniscule, perpetual, servitude, pittance, repository, perforation, anonymous, threshold, compensation, stethoscope, pathetic, façade, silhouette, insomniac, innovator

Section 8

Summary

“The Sixth Morning” Narration of this section begins with Balram referring to the emergency from the end of the previous chapter: a man’s death resulting from the activities of the outsourcing company he runs. He hastens to add that he wasn’t personally responsible for what happened, and that he will explain everything later.

Narration then returns to the past, with Balram describing how Mr. Ashok began enjoying Delhi’s nightlife in the aftermath of the departures of his brother and Pinky Madam, nightlife that included going to malls and clubs, drinking a lot, and eventually meeting (and taking home) a young woman. While all this is going on, Balram catches up on both reading (“Murder Weekly” is always handy) and his conversation with The Diseased Driver who, in response to Balram’s questions, tells him the sorts of bleak futures he – Balram – has to look forward to as a driver in India. Balram also tries to work out why Pinky Madam left him such an odd sum of money (47,000 rupees). Meanwhile, the girl who goes back to Ashok’s apartment with him turns out to be one of his old girlfriends (Uma). She tells Ashok, as Balram eavesdrops, that he (Ashok) should do something with his life that he actually wants to do, not what his family wants him to do.

That night, Ashok pays a visit to an assistant to an important minister in the national government, paying him a bribe in exchange for his (Ashok’s) family being helped in some way. Celebrations lead to Ashok being asked whether there will be civil war in India. The question goes unanswered as Ashok continues to drink heavily, the assistant pushing him into having sex with a European girl that he (the assistant) says looks like an American movie star. In spite of Ashok’s resistance, the assistant gets Balram to drive to the European girl’s address. There, she gets in the car, teasing Ashok with her beautiful blond hair. They go to a hotel, where Balram waits as the others go in. Ashok comes out about an hour later, apparently quite unwell. Balram drives him home, drops him off, and then goes back to the hotel: he wants to see the woman leave. He is chased off by a policeman, and then drives through Delhi, imagining the prospect of civil war.

In present tense narration, he describes the sights that he believes suggest that such a war will happen: “an overturned flower urn …hundreds [of men] under trees, shrines, intersections … what were they reading about? What were they talking about? … a beggar sitting by the side of the road, a nearly naked man coated with grime …” Back at the apartment, Balram searches the back seat of the car, eventually finding what he wants: “a strand of golden hair”. The section concludes with a reference to Balram having the hair in his desk “to this day”.

Analysis

In his narrative reference to an accident caused by one of his employees, Balram partially answers the question raised at the end of the previous section, and simultaneously foreshadows the last section of the book, in which the accident and its consequences are discussed in greater detail. Other than that, this section is most notable for the slow build of Balram's anger and resentment towards Mr. Ashok (in particular, Ashok's quick connection with another woman). This is the point where those feelings begin intensifying to the point that what Balram said, at the beginning of the book, about what happened to Mr. Ashok (i.e. that Balram killed him) becomes inevitable. Other elements of this section also contribute to that slow, but steady, intensification of feeling. These include the comments about the future made by The Diseased Driver; what Balram observes before, during, and after Ashok's sexual encounter with the beautiful blond; and, to a lesser degree, his contemplations on the prospect of civil war, which on another level also continues the narrative's exploration of politics (as does, in fact, the narration of what happens between Ashok and the assistant).

Additional noteworthy points include the appearance of "Murder Weekly (a blackly funny, ironic comment on the chain of events chronicled by the narrative) and the revelation that the woman Mr. Ashok has been spending time with is, in fact, an old girlfriend, whose suggestions to Ashok, that he do something with his life he really wants to do, sound intriguingly like what Balram has been saying to himself all along. These comments can also be seen as representing one aspect of the book's overall thematic exploration of the value of family: in Ashok's case, the implication that family is holding him back from his best, fullest life in the same way as Balram's family is doing to him. The family theme also manifests in the comments made by the assistant that as a result of what Mr. Ashok has just done, his family is safe. Finally, there is the reference to the money left for Balram by Pinky Madam, foreshadowing events in the following section in which that money plays a key role.

Discussion Question 1

How do Balram's observations at the end of the chapter about life on the street reflect the book's thematic interest in wealth vs. poverty?

Discussion Question 2

Given what the book has said about the state of politics in India, what do you think the two sides might be in the civil war referred to and/or imagined here?

Discussion Question 3

Based on what has been revealed about Balram to this point, what is the most likely explanation for his keeping of a hair from the blond prostitute?

Vocabulary

jeopardize, citify, debauchery, depravity, presumption, negotiate, excruciating, scenario, banyan, whetstone, mandala, ruckus, consummate

Section 9

Summary

“The Sixth Night”, Part 1, p. 191 – 223. Balram describes how he and The Diseased Driver made an arrangement for Balram to visit a prostitute with the same kind of blond hair as the woman that Mr. Ashok visited. The Diseased Driver tells Balram how much money he’ll need, and Balram is upset to learn that the money left for him by Pinky Madam isn’t enough. Balram then asks him about ways a driver can cheat his master in order to earn more money. After listing the ways he discovered (including making himself into a kind of secret, independent taxi service and cheating on repair bills for the car), Balram describes how he managed to get together enough money that, along with the money he got from Pinky Madam, gets him the prostitute he wants. The Diseased Driver takes him to the hotel where the prostitute is. She and Balram chat for a while, and then begin to get physical: Balram, however, suddenly erupts into anger when he discovers that the woman’s hair is dyed. When the girl screams, the manager comes, and Balram is forced out of the building, crying with frustration. The Diseased Driver later explains that if Balram wants to have sex with a genuine blond, he has to pay more money for it. Back at the hotel room, Mr. Ashok suddenly says he wants to have the kind of evening that Balram usually has, so Balram takes him out to a restaurant in the poorer part of town. When Mr. Ashok comments that he likes eating Balram’s kind of food, Balram thinks to himself that he feels the same way about Mr. Ashok’s food.

A series of events increases Balram’s resentment of Mr. Ashok: being verbally abused by Ashok and Mukesh Sir for giving a beggar a rupee; seeing a red canvas bag, used for carrying cash bribes, be used repeatedly; being tempted to steal the contents of the bag, and feeling like the actions and the mood of the city are encouraging him to do so; and the discovery, in a bookstore run by a Muslim in the low-class, red-light district of Delhi, of a quote from a work of poetry: “You were looking for the key for years / But the door was always open.” Later, as Balram leaves the red-light district, he imagines that a water buffalo, pulling a cartload of buffalo corpses, is telling him that his family’s been tortured and killed, the implication being that that is what will happen if he follows through on his plan to kill Mr. Ashok.

The next day, Balram comes close to making a full confession to Mr. Ashok, but Mr. Ashok misinterprets his unease: he thinks that Balram is nervous about asking for money to get married. Mr. Ashok reassures him, and then offers money: starting with a large amount, but then changing his mind several times and offering only a small amount. This, Balram says in narration, ended up in a sewer in the slums: he followed the in-cement footprints of a small animal to a stinking river running thick with sewage and threw the money in … poor and hungry children scrambling to retrieve it.

Analysis

There is the sense, in this section, that several events push Balram powerfully in the direction of what the narrative has indicated from the beginning he is going to do: kill Mr. Ashok. Two of these are directly related to Mr. Ashok's actions, both seemingly well-intentioned but both, in fact, profoundly triggering of Balram's awareness of the differences between them. Specifically, both Mr. Ashok's interest in Balram's sort of food and the quickly decreasing amount of money Ashok offers for the wedding both clearly suggest to Balram, and the reader, that Mr. Ashok is like any other rich, successful person in India: completely insensitive, completely self-absorbed, and completely blinded to the reality of the poor people around them. The third event that pushes Balram in the direction of murder is the quote from the poem. Ultimately, there is the sense, at the end of the chapter, that Balram's journey towards the end described at the beginning, is closer to that end than ever.

Meanwhile, the encounter with the prostitute suggests that Balram is, to some degree, determined to at least resemble Mr. Ashok in terms of the outer manifestations of success: his anger, therefore, can be seen as coming from a place of betrayal, of disappointment, and of reaction to the truth – that he is not nearly as successful as the man whose habits he is trying to emulate.

There are some powerful and effective images in this section. The sequence in which Balram describes what the city seems to be saying to him start to take the work in the direction of magic realism, a style of writing in which the extraordinary, the supernatural, the magical seem to become integrated, smoothly and without question, into the more realistic world of the story. Then there is final image of this section which is simultaneously poignant, angry, and stark: a group of starving children scrambling through sewage to get their hands on a few extra rupees. Of all the images of poverty in the book, this is perhaps the most vivid and the most emotionally affecting: there is the sense here that were it not for his powerful self-will, Balram or his children, as he himself has imagined, could very well be doing the same thing as the children here.

Discussion Question 1

In what ways are thematically-significant representations of poverty and wealth developed and contrasted in this section?

Discussion Question 2

What are the metaphoric implications of the poem? What does it seem to be suggesting to Balram?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Balram throws the money from Mr. Ashok in the river?

Vocabulary

paunch, toupee, infringe, repulsive, opaque, kaleidoscopic, slaver, brothel, particulate, accelerate, defecate

Section 10

Summary

“The Sixth Night”, Part 2, pp. 223 – 234. Back at the apartment building, Balram has a visitor: his nephew Dharam, who has been sent by Kusum to be taken care of by Balram and who has brought a letter in which Kusum threatens to tell Mr. Ashok that Balram has not been sending any money home. Balram takes out his frustrations on Dharam, hitting him and cutting his lip. Later, when Mr. Ashok is introduced to Dharam and asks what happened, Dharam just says he fell. Balram comments in narration that Dharam is a “smart boy”. That night, Balram is frightened by a lizard in his bed, and gets Dharam to kill and dispose of it. When he finally gets to sleep, Balram’s thoughts are haunted by the refrain from the poem.

Balram continues his narration with comments on a few things he feels that, at the time, he hadn’t paid enough attention to: “the stenciled signs on the walls in which a pair of hands smashed through shackles … the young men in red headbands shouting from the trucks”. He adds that he was too busy with his own troubles to what “was happening to [his] country”, suggesting that an election is coming.

Meanwhile, an angry conversation between Mr. Ashok and the woman now referred to as Ms. Uma (Mr. Ashok’s previous girlfriend) alerts Balram to the possibility that he is about to be fired. He is shortly distracted from his concern, however, by a demonstration in praise of The Great Socialist, which reminds Mr. Ashok that that is the day of an election. He has Balram turn on the radio, and is upset to learn that a coalition of opposition parties, including the one led by The Great Socialist, has won. The next day, Balram reports, Mr. Ashok has several intense conversations with Uma and with his brother, all referring to how the election results have messed up all their schemes, plans, and arrangements. Later that same day, Balram is assigned to drive two politicians around, one of whom he recognizes: Vijay, the ambitious, one-time bus conductor now an elected politician. Vijay and his companion empty the bottle of scotch that Balram keeps in the car as they talk about how they now have control of Mr. Ashok and his family. After returning them to the hotel, Balram cleans the car. While he’s on his way to meet with The Diseased Driver to give him the empty scotch bottle, the quote from the poet comes back to him: “I was looking for the key for years … but the door was always open.” He smashes the bottle on the ground, leaving it with several jagged edges.

The next day, Mr. Ashok doesn’t want Balram to drive him anywhere, and Balram takes the opportunity to go to the zoo with Dharam. After seeing most of the animals, Balram and Dharam are about to leave when they encounter a white tiger in its cage, pacing back and forth, “hypnotizing himself by walking like this – that was the only way he could tolerate this cage.” The tiger’s eyes meet Balram’s, and he faints (the third time in the narrative this happens). The next day, Balram dictates a letter to Dharam that is to be sent to Kusum back home. The letter describes what happened after Balram fainted,

with Balram instructing Dharam to tell “Granny” (Kusum) that he “can’t live the rest of [his] life in a cage.” He then tells Dharam to put the letter in the mail as soon as he (Balram) leaves, but not any earlier.

Analysis

As momentum builds, through this section, towards the murderous act the reader knows is coming, the narrative introduces and develops several key elements. The first is the character of Dharam who, in many ways, seems to be becoming, or at least about to become, a kind of apprentice to Balram, learning the ways of entrepreneurship, survival, and lying. The second is the reference to the images that Balram says he hasn’t been paying attention to, images that on one level are associated with the book’s narrative interest in politics and which, on a more metaphoric level, can be seen as evoking the novel’s thematic interest in freedom vs. slavery (i.e. the image of hands in chains). The political situation takes center stage later in the section, with the return of The Great Socialist and the somewhat surprising return of Vijay, both of which can be seen as possible spurs to Balram’s decision in regards to Mr. Ashok . Other incentives to act sooner rather than later emerge in the form of Ms. Uma’s comments on Balram and, most notably, in the trip to the zoo.

The image of the white tiger in the cage is important for several reasons. First, it is a clear echo of what the narrative referred to earlier as The Rooster Coop, in that both images involve animals trapped in cages and forced to live the sorts of constricted, manipulated lives that Balram feels he and others like him live. Second, and perhaps most notably, it is a vivid externalization of Balram’s inner situation: having referred to himself, and been referred to, as being as powerful and rare as a white tiger, seeing such a beast in such a cage reminds him viscerally of his own situation: hence the fainting, the third time in his life he has had such an experience. Finally, the white tiger itself is an important, metaphoric representation of several of the book’s themes.

Meanwhile, the reference to the letter carries with it an important implication: in the past, when Balram’s family was potentially in danger (specifically, the point at which Balram was set up to take the fall for Pinky Madam’s killing of the child while driving drunk), he chose to protect them. Now, it seems, he is considering entering a similar situation (i.e. one in which he is potentially putting his family at risk) but this time seems to be preparing to make a different decision. He is, at this stage of his journey, determined to live, whatever it might cost.

The final point to note about this section has to do with the liquor bottle, the breaking of which represents the “breaking point” Balram has reached and which, on a more literal level, creates the weapon used in the killing of Mr. Ashok, which finally takes place in the following section.

Discussion Question 1

How is the freedom vs. servitude theme developed in the relationship between Balram and Dharam?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways might the appearance of Vijay – and, more specifically, his new and sudden success – relate to Balram's decision to kill Mr. Ashok?

Discussion Question 3

Given that the only thing about a white tiger that's white is its main fur (that is: what's orange on a regular tiger), and that the stripes remain black, what thematic element of the book is evoked by the image of a white tiger? How does such an image reflect Balram and his moral values?

Vocabulary

vainglorious, insolent, precipice

Section 11

Summary

“The Sixth Night”, Part 3 – pp. 234 – 247. The next day, after Balram has put “a bundle” in the car, he then twice drops a rupee on the floor, twice asks Dharam to pick it up, and twice notices the part in Dharam’s hair, which is just like Mr. Ashok’s. Balram then collects Mr. Ashok and drives him from bank to bank, where Mr. Ashok fills the red canvas bag with a total of 700,000 rupees. Mr. Ashok then tells Balram to drive him to a particular hotel, but Balram takes a route through a very isolated area. He then pretends that there’s something wrong with a tire on the car, takes “the bundle” out with him, and gets Mr. Ashok to follow him, even though Balram senses that Mr. Ashok’s body senses what’s coming.

Mr. Ashok bends over and looks at the wheel of the car. Balram hits him with the broken bottle, in exactly the same space (i.e. the part in his hair) that he noticed on Dharam earlier. Mr. Ashok is stunned, but not dead, and then Balram decides to kill him outright, instead of leaving him to die: partly to prevent him recovering and revealing the truth, and partly because “his family was going to do such terrible things to [Balram’s] family: [Balram] was just getting [his] revenge in advance.” He finally kills Mr. Ashok by pressing a vein in his neck, in the same way as he used to press his father’s – but with a somewhat different intention. As Mr. Ashok dies, his blood spurts into Balram’s eyes. “I was blind,” Balram says. “I was a free man.”

Balram cleans himself up, changes into a clean shirt (the same T-shirt he wore into the mall earlier), and heads for the railway station. He briefly considers getting Dharam, but then realizes it could get them both in trouble. He grabs hold of the red bag and continues on his way. At the train station, he sees a couple of beggars and their baby, who is rolling around inside a bucket. He fishes out a coin, makes sure it’s a one-rupee and not a two rupee, and rolls it towards the bucket. He then “curses” himself, and walks out of the station. “Your lucky day, Dharam,” he says to himself.

Analysis

This section contains the book’s climax, which entwines both narrative and thematic elements in one action: the killing of Mr. Ashok. In narrative terms, Balram’s actions finally reveal the truth of what he said at the beginning of the book was going to happen, and also marks the highest points of Balram’s self-conflict (resolved by his finally killing Ashok), his anger, and his desperation. In terms of themes, Balram’s actions can be seen as literally striking a blow for freedom (destroying servitude), wealth (claiming the wealth in the red canvas bag), and perhaps even entrepreneurship: the murder is, on some level, the most blackly, and ironically, entrepreneurial thing Balram has done throughout the entire novel. The moment also evokes the “value of family” theme in a couple of different ways and, in a related implication, can almost be seen as Balram’s

act of revenge against a cultural system that he believes was responsible for his father's torturous life and death.

Other important elements include the reference to the red bag and the money it contains (echoing moments earlier in the narrative where their importance was implied but not explained); the very powerful image in the immediate moment of Ashok's death (a metaphoric reference to how he was emotionally "blinded" by his rage and/or determination, both of which combined to make him free); and the somewhat more subtly powerful image of the baby in the bucket and Balram's reaction, which can clearly be seen as echoing Mr. Ashok's actions earlier in choosing the smallest possible amount to give Balram for his wedding. This, in turn, leads to the final moment of the section, his departure from the train station and his reference to Dharam. The novel doesn't explicitly suggest what Balram is going to do, but the implication is clear: given what he has clearly noticed about himself in relation to the baby and the rupee, and also what Balram says about this being Dharam's "lucky day", it seems clear that rather than being even more selfish, he is going to go back, collect Dharam, and at least begin to give him a new life. Note, in this context, Dharam's name: rearrange the letters a little, and they spell "Dharma" which, in a deep irony, evokes the Eastern spiritual teaching of the value of "right living".

Discussion Question 1

How do the events in this section manifest the book's thematic interest in the value of family?

Discussion Question 2

What theme is metaphorically developed by the image of the baby in the bucket?

Discussion Question 3

Given what happens at the end of this section, what do you think Balram is doing when he does the trick with the rupee at its beginning?

Vocabulary

horde, disenfranchised, pilfer, ricochet, enclosure, interstices, dictate, nib, efficient, coruscate, persistent

Section 12

Summary

“The Seventh Night” Balram begins the final chapter of his narrative looking up at his chandelier for inspiration. He then picks up the story where he left off, describing picking up Dharam and taking a zigzag route south from Delhi towards Bangalore; describing how he convinced an illiterate man that one of the “Wanted” posters looking for Balram is, in fact, looking for someone else; how he (Balram) needed four weeks to calm his nerves; and how he figured out what he needed to do to make a living – drive late-night taxis for all the late-night workers in Bangalore.

At first Balram’s efforts to make this happen meet with little success: other people, it seems, had the idea before him. But then he uses some of the money he stole from Mr. Ashok and bribes a policeman, who puts one of the other taxi companies out of business and makes room for Balram (in narration, Balram notes that the policeman has a photograph of Gandhi in his office). Balram then establishes a business under the name of Ashok Sharma, changes his manner of speaking from that of a servant to that of a boss, and is soon running a stable of both cars and drivers.

Balram describes seeing men on the street discussing the political situation (including an impending visit to Bangalore from The Great Socialist), but comments that a revolution in India is never going to happen: too many people are waiting for outside influences to save them. He then refers, addressing Premier Jiabao directly, to how, in the next few decades, “it will be just us yellow men and brown men at the top of the pyramid, and we’ll rule the whole world.”

Balram then goes on to explain what happened earlier to interrupt his narrative (Section 7): one of his drivers hit a young man on a bicycle; he (Balram) deflected potential criminal charges with the help of a police official he keeps “his” with frequent bribes; and how he gave the victim’s family a large sum of money as compensation. When the guilty driver questions why Balram did what he did, suggesting that it makes him seem weak, Balram explains that he had to do things differently from how he lived, and how everyone else still lives, back in Laxmangarh. “I am in the Light now”, he says.

Balram describes how he went to “a temple and performed last rites” for all his family, presumably murdered by Ashok’s family in revenge for Balram’s actions. He also describes his belief that life for Dharam is good (i.e. going to a good English-language school) in spite of his apparently having figured out what’s happened and having no morals: Balram suspects that Dhraram will keep his mouth shut as long as he stays fed, and also suspects that he (Dharam) might have to be killed someday to keep him from revealing too much.

Balram then concludes his story by saying how forward looking he is, starting to get into real estate in anticipation of a boom in immigration and industry; how he believes that

everyone in power has killed SOMEONE, either metaphorically or literally, to get where they are; reiterates his belief that every once in a while, someone has to break out of The Rooster Coop; and how he still thinks that someday, he might get caught. But, he tells Premier Jiabao, it will all have been worth it “to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant.”

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is how it ties up several narrative loose ends, including the explanation of how Balram got to where he is in Bangalore (itself a clear tying up of the book’s thematic interest in entrepreneurship); explaining the importance of the emergency phone call earlier in the narrative (a clear echo of Pinky Madam’s accident, and a somewhat ironic echo of that accident’s aftermath: whereas both Pinky Madan and the driver here avoid responsibility, at least Balram doesn’t deflect that responsibility onto someone else); and about what happens to Dharam. What’s chilling about this last, however, is Balram’s suggestion that after everything that has happened, Dharam might end up as dead as the rest of the family is presumed to be, yet another indication of how desperate - or ruthless - Balram is when it comes to ensuring his own success. The irony here is that Balram knows, or at least suspects, that the consequences of his actions are going to catch up with him: his comments about Dharam, though, suggest that he is going to hold onto that success as long as he can.

Meanwhile, loose ends are also tied up thematically. The exploration of Light and Dark reaches its climax here, with Balram’s contention that he lives in a Light of success and moral righteousness very different from the Darkness in which he grew up, a life that he has, all along, pursued and been determined to achieve. The comment is noticeably ironic, given what he does in relation to his driver’s accident and what he says he might do to Dharam. In any case, in this moment, as always in the novel, Light represents freedom and wealth, as opposed to servitude and poverty: as such, the reference to being “in the Light” also establishes where Balram believes he is in those thematically-related terms as well. More particularly, the reference at the end of the section (and therefore of the book) to his no longer being a servant reinforces the idea that for him, being truly free has been a longtime goal, a goal that has finally (and at some cost) been realized. Then, and as noted above, the action of this section is defined by Balram’s celebration of his thematically central entrepreneurial attitude.

Also noteworthy are the novel’s last references to politics: the comment about the impending visit of The Great Socialist; the conclusion of the communication with the Chinese Premier (which is itself, it seems, as much about politics as anything else); and Balram’s comment about which races that the world will eventually belong to. All three suggest a certain matter-of-factness in Balram about what happened, a sense reinforced by his chilling comment that every successful person has, in some way, killed someone else to get where they are.

Finally, and perhaps most ironically, there is one last reference to Gandhi, again an ironic image of compassion and integrity in the midst of the dark, yet practical,

selfishness of people doing the best they can for themselves as opposed to doing it for the good of others or of the world, which was part of Gandhi's philosophy and practice. The bottom line of this image, and arguably of the book – or at least of its narrator: there is no room for compassion in the world of the entrepreneur striving for the Light of success.

Discussion Question 1

How does the novel's thematic interest in the value of family develop in this section?

Discussion Question 2

Given everything that Balram has done and everything that could potentially happen in the aftermath of his killing of Mr. Ashok, do you think he has truly escaped The Rooster Coop? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Do you agree or disagree with Balram's contention that every successful person has killed someone else, either literally or metaphorically? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

malaria, malnutrition, eradication, incentive, fugitive, etiquette, samosa, emaciated, exquisite, amenable, bereaved

Characters

Balram Halwai

Balram is the novel's central character, its protagonist and narrator. He describes himself, quite proudly and frequently, as an entrepreneur, saying at one point that he is the most successful entrepreneur in India. Given that an entrepreneur is, by definition, a salesman, there is the sense right from the novel's opening words that Balram is selling himself – to the ostensible reader of his story (i.e. Chinese premier Jiabao) and, in doing so, is presenting himself in the best possible light. This is not to say that Balram is a liar; there is the clear sense throughout the narrative that he is, to a significant degree confessing and/or revealing the truth. There is, nevertheless, in both Balram's story and the telling of it, an apparent determination to put a positive spin on some fairly negative things.

Born into a life of poverty and servitude, Balram's determination to lift himself out of both aspects of his circumstances and become a success drives his choices, and therefore drives both the action of the novel and the journey of transformation that gives that action its deeper meaning and its thematic values. He is unarguably clever, ambitious, and courageous; patient, watchful, and careful; devious, manipulative, and self-serving. He is perhaps the textbook definition of an "anti-hero", one whose characteristics and identity are not necessarily admirable but who accomplishes admirable things for reasons that may, or may not, be similarly worth respecting.

Balram wants to be more than he was / is expected to be, or assumed to be: he believes he deserves more than what his family and society are able to give him based on the life he was born into, and he acts on that belief. He does whatever he sees as necessary, or believes to be necessary, in order to realize that goal. He is ruthless, but has no doubt that what he is doing is his absolute, unquestionable right as a member of the human race, and as an individual. Nothing, it seems – not even the lives of his family – can be allowed, or is allowed, to stand in his way.

Mr. Ashok

Mr. Ashok becomes Balram's employer when the latter moves to the city of Dhanbad in India. Ashok is described as physically attractive and, to some degree, morally upright: he struggles, albeit ineffectually, against the corrupt business traditions and/or practices of both his family and his country. Eventually, however, he becomes just as defeated by the relentless pressure of both tradition and practice as he is by his demanding wife, Pinky Madam.

Ashok becomes the manifestation of everything cultural, financial, and moral that Balram believes is oppressing him and keeping him from being the kind of man he believes he has the right to be. This, combined with Ahsok's eventual succumbing to the

corrupt principles and morals of his environment, leads Balram to kill Ashok, making the latter as much a victim of his own weakness as of Balram's anger.

Pinky Madam

Pinky Madam is Mr. Ashok's wife. Beautiful, sexy, and demanding, she is also the only member of Ashok's immediate family who shows at least a degree of compassion for Balram and the situations he finds himself placed into as a result of that family's morals, perspectives, and actions. She is, however, primarily selfish, eventually leaving her marriage and India when it becomes inescapably clear that her husband is never going to give her the kind of life she truly wants.

The Stork

"The Stork" (whose true name is never given) is Mr. Ashok's father, a relatively wealthy landowner in Laxmangarh, Balram's home village. Elderly and infirm, The Stork requires frequent physical care which, as one of the newest and lowest servants in the household, Balram becomes responsible for. Balram's consequent sense that The Stork, like the rest of the family - and arguably the rest of India - sees him as something to be used is a primary motivator in his eventual choice of violence and robbery as the solution to his situation.

Mukesh Sir

Mukesh Sir is The Stork's elder son, and Mr. Ashok's elder brother. Manipulative, devious, selfish, and often mean, Mukesh Sir is powerful, corrupt, and entirely insensitive to the needs and value of servants and family alike. For protagonist Balram, he more than anyone else in the family seems to be the embodiment of everything that keeps him (Balram) in what everyone else seems to see as his place.

Ram Persad

Ram Persad is a senior servant in the household of Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam - specifically, the senior driver. When Balram joins the household, Persad has a lot of status over him, and seems to take pleasure in exerting the power associated with that status. When Balram discovers that Persad has been lying to his employers, Balram manipulates the situation so that Persad is dismissed and Balram gets his job. As such, Persad is arguably the first victim of Balram's ruthless, ambitious entrepreneurship.

Balram's Father and Mother

Both these characters die when Balram is relatively young, but their deaths both have profound impacts on him. His mother dies first, and in the traditions of the country and

religion in which Balram is raised, her body is burned (cremated) on a funeral pyre. At one point, her foot thrusts out of the flames, seemingly determined to survive the fire - an image that triggers and reinforces Balram's determination to improve his life. His father, on the other hand, died a miserable, lonely, painful death of tuberculosis, unattended in a dirty, stinking hospital. Balram's determination to not die discarded, as his father was, also fuels his drive to succeed.

Kusum

Kusum is Balram's devious, clever, manipulative grandmother. Unarguably poor and grasping, she is also unscrupulous, not above resorting to carefully worded blackmail in order to get her grandson to do what she wants him to do.

Kishan

Kishan is Balram's older brother, much less interested or determined to change his lot in life. He seems, Balram suspects, to be headed along the same path as their father: towards an early grave, hastened by overwork, under-feeding, and the contempt of others.

Dharam

Dharam is Balram's nephew, sent to live with him by Kusum. Dharam appears late in the narrative, and becomes a kind of informal apprentice to Balram's ambition. As watchful and as morally flexible as Balram, Dharam seems to learn the ways of the world very quickly.

"The Great Socialist"

The Great Socialist is never actually given a proper name: he is a powerful, corrupt, manipulative political figure who, from Balram's narrative perspective, seems to be the embodiment of everything wrong with India's political system. A liar and a cheat and a deal-maker, The Great Socialist claims to be acting in support of the people, but is in fact acting only in support of his own interests and those of his cronies.

The Diseased Driver

One of a small community of servants in a similar position to Balram's (i.e. driving for the wealthy), The Diseased Driver suffers from vitiligo, an illness that bleaches the pigment out of the sufferer's skin. Balram comments in narration that the disease is common among the servant class in India, leaving many with white patches in the middle of their brown complexions. The white patches on The Diseased Driver are around his lips, suggesting some sort of metaphoric corruption of his words, speech, or

ideas, a circumstance borne out by the lies, despair, and manipulations he keeps verbalizing to Balram.

Vijay

This character initially appears as someone whom Balram admires for his ambition. Later, however, Vijay reappears as the corrupt, violent beneficiary of The Great Socialist's political influence: there is the clear sense that Vijay has advanced in the world because he has ingratiated himself with (i.e. sucked up to) The Socialist and gained his favors. For Balram, Vijay's success is an example of the kind of success he DOESN'T want to realize for himself.

Premier Jiabao

The real-life premier of China in the early 2000's is the person to whom Balram addresses his story, ostensibly a letter written to Jiabao in order for Balram to introduce both himself and his philosophy of entrepreneurship. The character never actually appears in the story but is referred to several times. His presence is a catalytic trigger for Balram's confession-style recounting of his history.

Gandhi

This real world historical figure is known for, among other things, his abiding belief in compassion and integrity as the fundamental, most productive foundations from which human beings can live their lives. Statues and/or photographs of him appear at key times in the narrative, usually at points where their presence is most ironic: situations in which compassion is much less in evidence than experiences like corruption and selfishness.

Symbols and Symbolism

Chandeliers

Throughout the narrative, chandeliers represent and embody both light (as in illumination) and Light (as in success and wealth). The most vivid example of this can be found in the frequent references, in narration, to the chandelier that illuminates Balram's Bangalore apartment, the place in which he experiences the greatest success in terms of money and status.

The Wanted Poster

Early in the narrative, after Balram has revealed that he killed his former master, Mr. Ashok, he refers to a wanted poster with his face on it that was put up all over India. He first uses the words and images on the poster to describe, in narration, who he is and what he believes; later, in the immediate aftermath of Ashok's death, he convinces someone looking at the poster that he is not, in fact, the man the poster depicts. Thus the poster represents both the truths and the lies that Balram tells other people, perhaps even the reader, about himself.

The Red Canvas Bag

Like the wanted poster, reference is made to a red canvas bag early in the narrative without exact information as to what role it plays in the story. Later, however, the bag reappears and is used by Mr. Ashok and others to hold money for bribes. As the narrative reaches the climax, the bag and the relatively large amount of money it contains play important roles in triggering Balram's decision to kill Mr. Ashok: Balram is desperate to obtain the money in the bag and the freedom and status that money can, and will, buy him.

The Black Fort

Outside Balram's home village of Laxmangarh, there is an abandoned complex of buildings called The Black Fort. While it's never entirely clear what the Fort's original purpose actually was, there is a sense that it had something to do with war or the military. For the very young Balram, it is mysterious and frightening, metaphorically representing the views and ways of the culture against which he strives to rebel. Eventually, however, he matures enough to not be frightened of the Fort; visits on a couple of occasions; and at both times, uses the Fort as a vantage point from which to spit at his town, an evocation of just how much he is desperate to leave, or move on from, the constrictive way of life it represents for him.

The Honda City

The Honda City is a car - specifically, the more expensive and luxurious of the two cars owned by Mr. Ashok and his family. When Balram joins the family's staff, at first he is not allowed to drive the City, but when the senior driver leaves his job (partly because of Balram's manipulations of the situation) Balram is promoted, and gets to drive the City himself. This, and the car, represents an aspect of the higher status he has long sought to achieve for himself.

"Murder Weekly"

"Murder Weekly" is the name of a cheap, sensationalist magazine popular among Balram's fellow drivers. There is the sense that whenever it appears in the narrative, it is a bleakly, blackly funny foreshadowing of Balram's killing of Mr. Ashok.

Balram's T-Shirt

At one point during his employment with Mr. Ashok, Balram sees his employer wearing a particular style of T-shirt (plain white with a simple, single logo on the chest). Balram buys himself just such a T-shirt and uses it as a kind of disguise, or costume, to enable him to go into a part of India reserved for the wealthy: a shopping mall. Later, in the aftermath of his killing of Mr. Ashok, Balram puts on the T-shirt, to represent how, as the result of Ashok's death, Balram is now on his way to becoming the sort of person he just killed.

The Rooster Coop

The Rooster Coop is one of the book's more potent symbols. Literally, it refers to the cages in which large numbers of chickens are trapped, living out their lives and making eggs in a filthy, murderous, insensitive, greedy cage. Balram likens the situation of these chickens to the situation of him and other servants, suggesting that they are trapped in a destructive, relentless human Rooster Coop.

Images of Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi was an Indian political and cultural leader who advocated, among other things, peaceful resistance to corrupt authority; compassion; and respect. Several times throughout the narrative, his image (in the form of a statue or photograph) is ironically juxtaposed with events that are exactly the opposite: violent, selfish, and disrespectful.

The Scotch Bottle

Early in the narrative, Balram reveals that one of his jobs while working for Mr. Ashok and his family was to purchase expensive imported alcohol - specifically, Scotch. He does this several times, serving it not only to Mr. Ashok but to those with whom he does business. Late in the story, as Balram is becoming increasingly desperate to realize his ambitions and increasingly nervous about doing so by killing and robbing Mr. Ashok, a bottle of Scotch is emptied by two people he (Balram) is driving. Balram sees the empty bottle as a potential weapon; breaks the bottom off it; and uses what remains to kill his employer. Thus, the bottle can be seen as metaphorically representing how Mr. Ashok and his status were killed by the very same thing that proved his worth and status to Balram, and to the world.

Settings

India

This large, populous, poverty-stricken country is the broad strokes setting for the novel. For centuries, Indian politics and culture were defined and dominated by other, colonizing countries and societal systems: its struggle to find and define its own identity is part of the sub-textual backdrop of the action.

Laxmangarh

This small, poor village in a part of India known as The Darkness (in the vicinity of the Ganga River, also known as the Ganges) is Balram's home town. He deeply resents, to the point of hatred, the life he lived there, his feelings and desperation to leave powerfully fueling his ambitions and entrepreneurial drive.

Dhanbad

Balram leaves Laxmangarh for the greater opportunities and potential freedom of the larger, wealthier community of Dhanbad. It is there that he starts developing marketable skills, eventually being hired by Mr. Ashok and his family as a driver.

New Delhi

Mr. Ashok and his family move their business to the large, bustling city of Delhi, the capital region of the northern part of India. It is there that Balram is most inspired, and most irritated, by the successes and wealth around him, triggered by both to take the extreme action he does in order to succeed: the robbery and killing of Mr. Ashok.

Bangalore

This city in Southern India is the community in which Balram begins and ends his story: the present day narrative framework of the novel is set here, the city in which Balram took refuge / hid in the aftermath of Mr. Ashok's death. Bangalore is where he started his business, put all his entrepreneurial skills and experience into action, and made a new life for himself.

Themes and Motifs

The Nature of Entrepreneurship

The story begins and ends with its narrator / protagonist's views on, and celebrations of, entrepreneurship – or rather, his definition of entrepreneurship.

In general, being an entrepreneur is defined as seeing a need, either within a community or within oneself, and creating a business in order to fulfill that need. An entrepreneur whose drive towards success in business is powered by his perceptions of community develops a way to meet a particular need in that community; develops a way of fulfilling that need in a way that simultaneously makes people prepared to pay for it and makes him / her a profit; and then works hard to make sure that both addressing the need and making a profit are dealt with efficiently. On the other hand, an entrepreneur whose drive towards business success is defined by a personal belief, need, or value, skips the first part of the above mentioned process: such an entrepreneur doesn't necessarily see a need in a community, but CREATES a need, by creating a product or service that people didn't realize was missing. Such an entrepreneur then follows the next two steps of entrepreneurial practice, as defined above, in the same way.

In "The White Tiger", Balram follows the path of each kind of entrepreneur, but at different stages of his career. He follows the second path first: in the early part of his story, and driven by, as he says, a determination to better his life on his own terms, he seizes every opportunity to advance himself, not always considering whether there is, in fact, a need for what he has to offer. There is a key turning point, however, in his entrepreneurial journey: the moment at which he discovers there is a need for a driver to accompany Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam to Delhi. This is the moment at which he shifts into the second type of entrepreneur: he sees a need, and creates a set of circumstances to suggest that he is the only person, and is possessed of the only immediately accessible skills, to fulfill that need. The question raised by the book is this: whether entrepreneurial success, driven by personal need (as Balram's is) or not, justifies the means of achieving that success: in the case of Balram getting the job as driver, he causes another driver to lose his job. Later, in the name of realizing even greater personal success and independence, Balram very likely causes his family to lose their lives. Again, the question is the age old one of whether the end justifies the means. Balram would say yes: but what would the reader say?

Poverty vs. Wealth

One of the two primary reasons that Balram takes the actions that he does (i.e. the means) in order to reach the end that he desires (i.e. independence) forms the basis of the book's second central theme. From the beginning of the story he tells, as is true of the beginning of his life, Balram is clear on one thing: that he wants more from his life

than the circumstances into which he was born give him room to have. Those circumstances are principally defined by economic factors: specifically, his family's poverty, in a part of India where living without is a way of life for the vast majority of the population. Balram's determination to rise above the grinding, destructive lack that surrounds him is a deep, almost obsessive drive within him, the urgency of which he manages to temper somewhat with patience but which, ultimately, controls him with a slowly burning desperation that eventually explodes into a flaming blaze of resentment that directly causes one death (i.e. Mr. Ashok's) and, as Balram believes, indirectly causes several others (i.e. his family's). Those deaths, Balram believes, are all worth it, as long as he gets a chance to realize what he believes is his purpose: to live a life of success, if not outright wealth.

The fire that burns within Balram is fueled by the tension, and/or the disparity, between poverty and wealth that he sees around him. As he moves further and further into the world of the wealthy, he sees how casually the people inhabiting that world treat their money; he sees the patronizing, manipulative way the wealthy treat the poor; and he sees the self-defeating way in which the poor treat themselves and each other. He decides early in his life that he is made for better things than to live within what he calls "The Rooster Coop" in which every other poor person he sees seems to be trapped, and that he is going to do whatever it takes to live his life on his own terms – that is, closer to the terms of those whose wealth has, in the past, kept him and those like them in the places to which they and the culture have become accustomed.

Freedom vs. Servitude

For Balram, and for the novel, poverty equals servitude, while wealth equals freedom. Never mind that the wealthy people for whom he works (The Stork, Mukash Sir, Mr. Ashok) are themselves in a kind of servitude to the people whose favors they seek with expensive bribes: all Balram sees is wealth associated with opportunity, which is associated with more wealth, which brings more opportunity, and so on. For him, servitude is as much a prison as the physical walls of something like the real Rooster Coop: no-one gets out, and after a while no-one WANTS to get out.

Over time, Balram's determination to escape his life of servitude (and therefore his life of poverty) becomes the single dominating goal of his existence. There is the sense that for much of his early life, the only option he had was to simply survive – the circumstances into which he was born made little else possible. But when he realized, in his own independent-thinking, self-obsessed way, that another life was, in fact, possible, he made freedom his life's work, his life's purpose. Here it's essential to note that his determination to be free overwhelmed any and every other consideration: there was, for him, nothing that could not, would not, or should not be done in order to gain him the freedom he desired – the freedom that, his narration implies, is the right of every human being, even though the vast majority of people are too trapped or too frightened to see it. Balram sees himself as being courageous enough to fight for the freedom from servitude that he believes he deserves, and sees himself as entirely justified in ending at least one life (if not more) in order to win that fight. The question is whether he sees

the ultimate self-delusion of the situation into which he arrives following the death of Mr. Ashok: in servitude to the police, upon whose favors he depends; in servitude to the laws against murder, under which his freedom could be ended at any moment; and in servitude to his own guilt, or sense of conscience, which drives him, the reader senses, into extremes of self-justification.

Light vs. Dark

The tension between wealth and poverty in the novel, as discussed above, parallels the tension between freedom and servitude – not just for Balram, but for other characters and situations as well. Also throughout the novel, these sets of situations – wealth/freedom, poverty/servitude – are portrayed in metaphorical terms as light and darkness. For Balram and for the reader, light is equated with freedom and wealth; darkness is equated with poverty and servitude. This is true of both sorts of light and darkness referred to in the story: specifically, that which is capitalized, and that which is not.

To start with the latter: Balram's life, and the narration of that life, literally begin in The Darkness, the nickname given to the poverty-afflicted region of Northern India into which he is born. The moral, spiritual, and psychological darkness of this life is represented by The Black Fort, an ancient building on the outskirts of the community in The Darkness where Balram lives, a building which he fears to enter but which he finally does penetrate, visiting a second time as he's getting ready to move onward and upward and using it as a place from which to spit at his home town (i.e. his former life). In this moment, the darkness and The Darkness are revealed to be sources of contempt (perhaps the contempt in which he comes to hold human life, a contempt that ultimately seems to be necessary in order for him to succeed: in other words, he becomes part of The Light because of what he is as a result of The Darkness.

Meanwhile, as he advances up from the barely-alive, ambition-frustrated circumstances of his family, Balram becomes more and more aware of the alluring Light of success, freedom, and wealth. This movement climaxes in Section 12, in which he describes himself, a successful entrepreneur with a lot of money, as being "in the Light now". In the same way as the Black Fort represents darkness, the many chandeliers to which Balram refers, particularly the one in his home and office, represent that Light, Balram's beliefs that he not only deserves better things, but has finally achieved them.

The Value of Family

Threading its way through all the incidents, narrations, and themes of the book is an important secondary, or sub-theme. This is the novel's exploration of the value of family, portrayed at some points as the bedrock upon which someone's life is based and, at other times, portrayed as a disposable stepping stone upon which a character steps as s/he moves forward, eventually being discarded. These contrasting perspectives on family are embodied in two contrasting families. The former, family as support and

anchor, is embodied by the family of Mr. Ashok, whose brother and father simultaneously keep him attached to them and enable him to have what little freedom he actually can call his own.

Here it is important to note the contrasts and parallels between Mr. Ashok and Balram. Even though the former relies on his family in the way the latter does not, even though the latter ultimately considers his family disposable in the way the former does not, both men are aware that they are in servitude to their families and their families. The difference is that Mr. Ashok's life is, because of his family, relatively comfortable and tolerable: he is therefore unwilling to take any action to remove himself from that servitude. He may resent it: he's not about to do anything about it. In contrast, Balram's life is, because of his family, entirely UN-comfortable and ultimately IN-tolerable. But he, unlike Mr. Ashok, is not prepared to accept his circumstances, and is therefore ENTIRELY willing to do whatever is necessary, including perhaps sacrificing the lives of his family, to change his situation. For Mr. Ashok, family has a positive value: for Balram, family has a negative value. These parallel lines of character and perspective often mirror each other quite directly and in vivid juxtaposition in narration and action, creating the strong sense that for the novel as a whole, the question of family relationship is unarguably and unavoidably tied to the book's other narrative and thematic elements.

Styles

Point of View

The story is told from the first person point of view of narrator and protagonist Balram Halwai, a self-proclaimed “entrepreneur” who intends that his story be read by a soon-to-be visiting Chinese politician. On one level, Balram’s point of view, in telling the story, is that the Chinese people in general and the Premier in particular have a great deal to learn about entrepreneurship, and that Balram is just the person to teach them. On another level, however, there is the sense that despite his protestations to the contrary, Balram is still troubled by what he did to Mr. Ashok, and is using the letter, probably unconsciously, as a means of confession or of justifying himself: in some ways, it feels as though that Balram is writing because he believes that if he is able to convince someone important that what he did was right, he might start believing it himself.

Another noteworthy aspect of point of view is that the narrative occasionally shifts from past tense to present tense. In moments such as his descriptions of a driver’s life and future (Section 8), this shift in tense draws the reader more fully, and arguably more intensely, into Balram’s experiences.

Finally, in terms of thematic point of view, it’s interesting to note that what the novel has to say, in relationship to its various themes, is defined primarily by the thoroughness with which Balram’s voice, ideas, and perspectives penetrates, or permeates, the writing. For example, is what Balram evidently believes about the value of family (that family is worth sacrificing for freedom) what the author is saying, or what Balram is saying? There is the clear sense that it is, in fact, the latter, meaning that the author’s point of view is perhaps the opposite, which makes Balram’s thematic contentions (i.e. his narrative point of view) ultimately ironic.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the book’s use of language and subsequent implications of meaning is that while the first language of its composition is evidently English, it is rich with the vocabulary, images, and ways of India. There is very clearly a sense of place, of culture, and of atmosphere about the book, all of which are communicated clearly through its use and development of language. Daily habits of both the poor and the wealthy; social history and traditions; even the spiritualities and the geographies of this complex, self-contradictory part of the world are all vividly developed, providing key elements of big picture context for the smaller picture, more immediate and more individual elements of Balram’s story.

The second point to note about the use of language in the book has to do with its point of view as defined above. This is the fact of its first person narration which, as is the case with all such narration, raises the question of just how much the narrator’s

perspectives, comments, and reportings can or should be trusted. While many first person narrators can be safely assumed by the reader to be trustworthy, the character and nature of this particular first person narrator raises the question, in the mind of the reader, just how much of what he says can or should be believed. The generally used term for this sort of narration is the designation “unreliable narrator”, a character telling the story whose words may or may not be entirely believable. While it’s certainly clear, in terms of both the story’s point of view and language, that Balram has a particular agenda in telling this story (i.e. making himself look good), there is also a sense, related to the above referenced idea that on some level, his storytelling here is a kind of confession, that much of what he says is the truth. Certain elements of vulnerability, self-recrimination, and certainly of guilt creep in on just enough occasions to suggest to the reader that what Balram is talking about actually happened, in the way that it happened, and that while he feels justified about what he did and might in fact have reason to lie, he also feels, on some level, like the time has come to tell the truth.

Structure

There are, essentially, two timelines at work in the novel, timelines that give framework or grounding to its structure. These timelines might be reasonably defined as the present and the past.

The present timeline is the framing element of the narrative, the context within which the story of the past is told. The story begins and concludes in the present – specifically, with Balram in his apartment in Bangalore, lit by his prized chandelier, its light illuminating his journey through, and into, the truth of his history. The narrative occasionally returns to the present, but for the most part, the story’s emphasis is on the second timeline – the story of Balram’s past, or how he lived and what he did that got him to this present-day state of being.

The narrative of the past is, for the most part, structured in a linear fashion: action leads to reaction, cause leads to effect, event leads to event, as this timeline builds to the climactic - and deadly - confrontation between Balram and Mr. Ashok in Section 11. That said, there are moments within this particular timeline in which Balram briefly jumps back to out-of-sequence events in the past, or jumps forward into events of his future (events which are themselves in the past of the present day timeline). This flipping back and forth, forward and back in time works because of the framing device: as Balram looks back at his life, he can choose the events or the time at which he’s looking, placing those events in the order defined by his present-day perspective – that is, how he wants the reader to hear, see, and understand his story. In other words, the framing device is securely structured by linear storytelling: the journey into the past is more fluid and flexible in its general structure.

Quotes

Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, DOES have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them … and these entrepreneurs – WE entrepreneurs – have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now."
-- Narration (Balram) (Chapter 1)

Importance: In this quote, Balram's narration introduces both one of the book's key plot elements (i.e. his development as an entrepreneur) and one of its key themes (i.e. the meaning, nature, costs and consequences of being an entrepreneur.

"… the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time.
-- Narration (Balram) (chapter 1)

Importance: Once again, Balram's narration develops the theme of entrepreneurship, describing the (unique?) demands of being an entrepreneur in India. He is, ultimately, describing himself.

Here's a strange fact: murder a man, and you feel responsible for his life – POSSESSIVE, even. You know more about him than his father and mother; they knew his fetus, but you know his corpse. Only you can complete the story of his life; only you know why his body has to be pushed into the fire before its time …"
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 2)

Importance: Balram's narration offers an intriguing perspective on the relationship different people have between life and death. Sub-textually, he is referring to his own feelings about the man he killed, Mr. Ashok. The reference to fire is also significant, in that an incident on the occasion of his mother's cremation (i.e. being burned to ashes by fire instead of being buried) is a key inspiration for him to realize his entrepreneurial ambitions.

Is there any hatred on earth like the hatred of the number two servant for the number one?"
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 3)

Importance: Here Balram sums up not only his own situation as a badly treated servant for the selfish Mr. Ashok and his family, and not only that of what the novel suggests is the situation of every servant every where; he also sums up the primary motivation of one of the novel's key themes, its exploration of the tension between freedom and servitude.

If I were making a country, I'd get the sewage pipes first, then the democracy, then I'd go about giving pamphlets and statues of Gandhi to other people, but what do I know? I'm just a murderer!
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 4)

Importance: In a pointedly humorous aside (i.e. comment made without direct reference to the main story), Balram comments on the political process, perspectives, and values of his home nation. Gandhi was a leader who espoused peace and compassion: in this comment Balram can be seen as suggesting that it's a greater act of compassion to develop first a functioning sewage system and then a democracy before preaching the ideals of compassion.

The great man … had one of those either/or faces that all great Indian politicians have. This face says that it is now at peace – and you can be at peace too if you follow the owner of that face. But the same face can also say, with a little twitch of its features, that it has known the opposite of peace: and it can make this other fate yours too, if it so wishes."
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 4)

Importance: The "great man" referred to hear is The Great Socialist, a corrupt and hypocritical politician. The implication of the quote is that beneath the mask of peace and compassion worn by this and other politicians, there is a great and easily accessible capacity for violence and corruption, aspects of the political system (and of The Great Socialist) revealed by the novel's action.

It makes me happy to see a chandelier. Why not, I'm a free man, let me buy all the chandeliers I want. For one thing, they keep the lizards away from this room … lizards don't like the light, so as soon as they see a chandelier, they stay away … sometimes, in my apartment, I turn on both chandeliers, and then I lie down amid all that light, and I just start laughing. A man in hiding, and yet he's surrounded by chandeliers! There – I'm revealing the secret to a successful escape. The police searched for me in darkness: but I hid myself in light."
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 5)

Importance: This quote vividly and plainly references the novel's thematic, and metaphorical, interest in light and dark, the former representing success, freedom, and safety; later representing poverty, slavery, and danger. The image is developed here both ironically and directly.

I could see multitudes of small, thin, grimy people squatting, waiting for a bus to take them somewhere, or with nowhere to go and about to unfurl a mattress and sleep right there. These poor bastards had come from the darkness to Delhi to find some light – but they were still in the darkness … my father, if he were alive, would be sitting on that pavement … I couldn't stop thinking of that and recognizing his features in some beggar out there. So I was in some way out of the car too, even while I was driving it."
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 5)

Importance: Here again, the novel develops the light vs. dark theme, equating it quite clearly with success and poverty. The reference to Balram's father here is also important, in that it's the first time in the narrative that he (Balram) sees the crowds of poor people that frequently surround him, and indeed populate the entire country, as having a personal resonance.

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent – as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse."
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 7)

Importance: Here again the novel develops the freedom vs. servitude theme, this time with a comment on how those in the servant class seem to be so desperate to protect what little they have that they will do anything to keep anyone desiring to escape the system from rocking the boat in any way.

Mr. Ashok … returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him – and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent?"
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 8)

Importance: Throughout the narrative, the Honda City (a luxury vehicle) represents success and status, not only for Balram (who drives it) but also its owners. The metaphor here is that if the most moral of persons, which is what Mr. Ashok seems to want to be, can be corrupted by wealth, what chance does a servant have to not be corrupted as well?

The dreams of the rich, and the dreams of the poor – they never overlap, do they? See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of? Losing weight and looking like the poor.
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 9)

Importance: This narrative comment appears in response to Mr. Ashok's desire to eat the kind of food that Balram would normally eat. The sense here is that Balram is all too aware of the ironies in both their situations. That awareness, however, does not stop him from wanting the kind of life that he thinks Mr. Ashok has.

…I won't be saying anything new if I say that the history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand-year war of brains between the rich and the poor. Each side is eternally trying to hoodwink the other side: and it has been this way since the start of time. The poor win a few battles … but of course the rich have won the war for ten thousand years.
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 9)

Importance: In this comment on the thematically central issue of relations between freedom and servitude, between wealth and poverty, the line between practicality and

cynicism becomes blurred as Balram recognizes that the battle has been going on for centuries.

Iqbal, that great poet, was SO right. The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave … if you taught every poor boy how to paint, that would be the end of the rich in India.
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 10)

Importance: This brief glance at the poeticism in Balram's soul takes a different sort of look at the central thematic issue of poverty vs. servitude suggesting that a servant's ambitions to have a better life can be triggered by something other than what has triggered Balram's: a desire for greater wealth and status.

When I was a boy in Laxmangarh, and I used to play with my father's body, the junction of the neck and the chest, the place where all the tendons and veins stick out in high relief, was my favorite spot. When I touched this spot, the pit of my father's neck, I controlled him – I could make him stop breathing with the pressure of a finger."
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 10)

Importance: In this quote, a gesture of affection is portrayed as transmuting into a gesture of destructive hatred: a gesture of love from son to father becomes a murderous gesture embodying death from servant to master.

Keep your ears open … in any city or town in India – and you will hear stirrings, rumors, threats of insurrection. Men sit under lampposts at night and read. Men huddle together and discuss and point fingers to the heavens. One night, will they all join together – will they destroy the Rooster Coop? Ha!
-- Narration (Balram) (Section 12)

Importance: The novel's frequent glancings at India's political system, along with that system's basis in the inequality of the economic system, receive one last, ironic laugh in this comment from Balram: most of those trapped in the system, he suggests, will never be like him and have the guts to get out.