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## KÖNIGS ERLÄUTERUNGEN

Band 486

### Aravind Adiga, *THE WHITE TIGER*

von Matthias Bode

## PRÜFUNGSAUFGABEN MIT MUSTERLÖSUNGEN

In Ergänzung zu den Aufgaben im Buch (Kapitel 6) finden Sie hier zwei weitere Aufgaben mit Musterlösungen. Die Zahl der Sternchen bezeichnet das Anforderungsniveau der jeweiligen Aufgabe.

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### Aufgabe 5 (Grundkurs) \*\*

#### Discuss the role religion plays in *The White Tiger*.

Different characters in the novel deal with religion in different ways. Some are pious, some are prejudiced and some do not care, but religion is always present in the narrative. Three major religions are featured: Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Buddhism is mentioned only once, because the Buddha received his enlightenment close to Laxmangarh (p. 15).

The traditional Hindu belief is referred to on the first pages, when Balram's mother is burned on the banks of the Ganges. Hinduism as such is not explained, only its large number of gods is mentioned. Hindu theology is complicated, and neither the narrator nor the author attempt to explain it in any way. Various gods are named, including Hanuman, Shiva and Krishna. Balram goes to temples, but not regularly. He fakes respect for various objects along the roads, such as trees. He can pull this off, however, only because Ashok himself does not know anything about Hinduism. Balram does not take his religion seriously. This becomes obvious when the older driver Ram Persad is praying to a handful of idols. Balram sees himself forced to buy a handful too, so that the other man does not become suspicious. The comic situation becomes serious when it turns out that Ram Persad fakes his belief because he is actually a Muslim (p. 90).

Islam appears numerous times in the novel, which reflects Indians' concern over it since the 1947 Partition as well as its continuing tensions with Pakistan. In an early scene in Dhanbad, the Stork corrects Mukesh's son, who playfully idolizes the famous Muslim captain of the Indian cricket team (p. 59). India is now tolerant enough to have a Muslim cricket captain, but not enough to appreciate him. Ram Persad, the loyal driver, becomes a victim of this widespread anti-Muslim sentiment in Indian society. After months of service for the family, he is discovered to be a Muslim. He runs away even before he can get fired.

Even though Ram Persad had been in his way, Balram himself holds nothing against Muslims. He repeatedly refers to who he considers the four greatest poets in the world, Rumi, Iqbal, Mirza Galib, all of them Muslims. He keeps forgetting the fourth name, but later on mentions Kahlil Gibran, another Muslim poet. Even the lines "I was looking for the key for years / but the door was always open" (p. 216), the key to understanding Balram's story, must have been written by a Muslim poet, because it is read to him in Urdu, the language of the Muslims population in Pakistan, by the Muslim bookseller. Later in the story, one of the drivers in Balram's Bangalore business will be a Muslim.

The way Adiga deals with Islam in the novel thus reflects both the growing unease of the Western-oriented public with all things Muslim, and real concerns about the relationship between Hindus and Muslims in India.

Christianity as the third world religion is depicted as the foreign, the different religion. Balram does not seem to understand the concept of Trinity: He sees three gods in Christian religion (p. 6). Disregarding the fact that Indian Christians do exist, the Nepali guard and the older driver Ram Persad discuss Pinky Madam's clothing in connection to her being Christian. Being Western, being sexy and being Christian merge into a diffuse concept of 'foreignness' (p. 65). In the same vein, Ashok is thought to have made a mistake in marrying Pinky not because she is Christian, but because she is foreign. The truly religious aspects of Christianity are not dealt with, however, by any character.

Apart from all the references to these traditional creeds, Balram himself does not care about religion. The striking line, "36,000,004 divine arses to choose from" (p. 6) shows that religion is totally beyond him; he even fakes his belief. Balram's world seems a loveless one. The harsh realities of life and the poverty around him have left him without any religious sentiment. To realise his father's wish – that he may 'live like a man' – he murders. He finds that acceptable: Maybe affecting the wrong person, but generally right. He does not seem to have scruples, he even thinks that "everyone who counts in this world ... has killed someone or other on their way to the top" (p. 274). Capitalism is the new religion.

On one of the last pages Balram states that he wants to found a school for poor children in Bangalore: "A school where you won't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi – nothing but the facts of life for these kids." (p. 275). The future young entrepreneur and unlikely benefactor Balram thus envisions may not be without morals, but definitely is without religion.

### Aufgabe 6 (Leistungskurs \*\*\*)

#### Compare and contrast *The White Tiger* with the movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Comparing *The White Tiger* with the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* almost suggests itself. Both works are set in modern India, and they were created roughly at the same time. The following comparison will primarily refer to the movie and not with *Q&A*, the novel it is based on.

*The White Tiger* and *Slumdog Millionaire* both deal with the vast social differences in contemporary India, concentrating on the poor. Their protagonists are young men; Jamal Malik is 18, Balram is 24 most of the story. Both lose their mothers early in life. In the case of Jamal, this means that he has to find his way alone in the slums. Balram is still living at home, but he is exploited by his family. Thus, both suffer a depressing childhood.

There are more similarities: Anti-Muslim feelings pervade both works: The Stork in *White Tiger* dislikes Muslims, and his driver cannot work for him anymore after it is discovered that he is a Muslim. Likewise, Jamal's mother in *Slumdog Millionaire* is killed during anti-Muslim riots in the slums of Mumbai.

The narrative point of view is similar, too. Jamal explains to the police in a series of flashbacks why he knows all the answers in "Who wants to be Millionaire"; Balram narrates in a series of flashbacks how he became a successful entrepreneur.

Different, however, are the stories the two protagonists are telling. Their origins are different, too. Balram comes from a village somewhere in the middle of nowhere. He calls it the "Darkness", the rural areas all over India without decent infrastructures. Jamal hails from the city slums of Mumbai. From a Western point of view, these may both seem grim and hopeless places, but the visible energy of the city contrasts sharply to the dull and dreary countryside. The movie shows the slum as a place where the kids can at least have fun. Fun, though, is completely missing from the descriptions of Laxmangarh. Balram's story becomes vibrant only when he reaches the city, first Danbadh, then Delhi.

The police in the movie appear cruel and sadistic. They even torture Jamal to find out how he cheated. This negative view of the police is comparable to that given in *White Tiger*. Already in the "Wanted" poster, Balram explains, it becomes apparent that Indian police are incompetent. They are described as corrupt and self-important in the novel, always eager to harass innocent people until they are bribed to stop. In the course of the movie, however, the policemen start to listen and believe Jamal. They are given a much better image in the end than in the beginning – and a better image than the police in Bangalore, who are still happy to be bought by Balram at the end of the story.

Yet the most obvious difference is that Adiga wrote his novel without a love interest for Balram. In the movie, Jamal's love is Latika, an old friend from the slums. She is forced into organised crime with his brother Salim. Jamal loses her time and again, and in the end he enters the show to find her. She sees him on TV, and when he phones a friend, she is on the phone to tell him that she is safe. The interest in Latika keeps Jamal going, she is always present in his hopes and dreams, the motivation and the reason for his success.

Balram does not marry an old girl-friend from Laxmangarh. When he visits the prostitute Anastasia, Balram remembers Indian films where the hero always rescues the girl in danger. He thinks that he could be the hero of such a movie and rescue her. But then he decides to get his money's worth after all and sleep with her. Balram lives in a loveless world, and the lack of love in the novel adds to the realism of the story. The friendship with Latika gives Jamal hope, and any such relationship for Balram would probably have changed his position in the novel.

Both the novel and the movie deal with poverty and social injustice in modern India. Both present stories of success. But is advance in society possible? For Balram, climbing the social ladder is only possible through crime. The world is a hard and unfair place, and Balram succeeds by becoming hard and unfair, too. Survival for the young brothers Jamal and Salim depends on petty crime, and Salim even drifts off into organized crime. Jamal, however, is presented as innocent. His success is not caused by his own work or his own decisions, but in the end only by sheer luck.

Is *Slumdog Millionaire* a fairy tale? Yes, surely. It is also a romantic movie, with a nice guy as the hero, a love story, and a happy ending. It shows a fantastic story in the Bollywood tradition, where the young hero successfully finishes the show in a series of unbelievable coincidences. Boy gets girl and leaves poverty

behind him. In true Bollywood style, the movie ends with a dancing scene in Mumbai station. Apart from Jamal's story, however, the image of India that forms the background is as harsh as in *White Tiger*.

*The White Tiger* does not have a happy ending, no love interest, hardly any bizarre coincidences, and it surely is not a fantastic story of a young hero. Jamal will be liked by audiences. Balram, in contrast, will surely evoke ambiguous or downright negative feelings in many readers – although others might actually identify in part with him and his attitude, which is marked both by the hard-nosed cynicism of one who has made it on his own, and the honest moral outrage of the victim he once was.