

**MARGINALISED: FINDING A VOICE IN ARVIND ADIGA'S
*THE WHITE TIGER***

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All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned
Someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted these answers too.
Though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I
was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except Myself,
questions which I and I only could answer. It took me a long time And
much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization
Everyone else appears to have been born with: That I' am nobody but
myself.

-Ralph Ellison (From Invisible Man)

Abstract

Yes! Finding a Voice is possible even to the minorities, fringe dwellers
and marginalized—only if they are destined not to stay a slave or only by
realizing who they are and what they are actually capable to be or as in the
words of the anti-hero Balram (in *The White Tiger*, by Arvind Adiga, an
Indian author; the selected novel for the study), strongly believes: “Even
as a boy I could see what was beautiful in the world. I was destined not to
stay a slave” (41); the margins should believe that they could come out of
their shell.

However if other marginalized in the novel could not find their voice:
“*They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this
world*” (40). The emancipation should be there in blood to gain one's
voice. But the found voice would be a triumph or a failure is the question
which do not have a substantiate answer. This paper would focus on how
Arvind Adiga has beautifully encompassed the striking inequalities of
differences where the masses suffer to find their voice.

Key words: Arvind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, from driver to a master to
master of drivers, gaining voice.

The White Tiger gives an autobiographical account of a successful entrepreneur in the
form of instruction to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao who is about to come to India to learn
about the grooming entrepreneurs. It is a simple, yet sorrowful story of how Balram, the anti-

hero of the novel is getting corrupted to transform from a sweet, innocent village fool to a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness to realize that:

I was looking for the keys for years
 But the door was always open. (267)

The open door is an ironic gateway which the author has implied to create awareness; that in the society of an unequal difference, the doors for success would be rather through an illicit way. But Balram justifies his illegal growth.

See – Mr. Ashok is giving money to all the politicians in Delhi so that they will excuse him from the tax he has to pay. And who owns the tax, in the end? Who but the ordinary people of this country – you! (244).

When the law could excuse the tax-evaders like Ashok and the corrupted school teacher and the politicians who bribe for votes, Balram justifies his transformation from a poor village boy to a driver to “a hunter criminal to a solid pillar of Bangaloriean society” (292). But has Balram succeeded in his survival would be a question which could never have an answer. In the words of Margaret Atwood :

The Survivor has no triumph or victory but the fact of his survival; he has little after his ordeal that he did not have before, except gratitude for having escaped with his life. (*Survival* 42)

Balram is eventually able to break his biological identity of Munna alias Balram Halwahi—a low class servant to adapt a new identity; Ashok Sharma—an upper class entrepreneur. He has actually become *The White Tiger* that comes once in a generation; as the title of the novel strikes. He is indeed the first in his generation to unfetter the chains of slavery that his ancestors were bound with and envisioned in himself that; “I am tomorrow” (6). But his survival could be only an endurance survival. In the triumph of his survival he has lost his family, lost his roots, lost his identity and therefore it is only a bare survival.

A preoccupation with one’s survival is necessarily also a preoccupation with the obstacles to that survival. In earlier writers these obstacles are external – the land, the climate, and so forth. In later writers the obstacles tend to become both harder to identify and more internal; they are no longer obstacles to physical survival but obstacles to what we may call spiritual survival, to life as anything more than a minimally human being. Sometimes fear of these obstacles becomes itself the obstacle, and a character is paralyzed by terror (either of what he thinks is threatening him from the outside, or elements in his own nature that threaten him from within). It may even be life itself that he fears; and when life becomes a threat to life, you have a moderately vicious circle. If a man feels he can survive only by amputating himself turning himself into a cripple or a eunuch, what price survival? (*Survival* 42)

In accounting the story of a half-baked man; Arvind Adiga has conveyed the true colour of his country which is the utmost duty of any writer according to Margaret Atwood.

We all know that authors are private people, but until recently our authors were treated only as private people. Authors are also transmitters of their culture. (*Survival* 19)

Also Atwood recommends that any writer should write in such a way that;

It begins with the personal, continues through the social or cultural or national and ends with “The Universe”, the universal. (*Survival* 22)

Thus *The White Tiger* attempts to narrate the story of Balram's personal life and in the process accommodates the social set-up of Indian country which is bifurcated into two segments—the country of Dark and the country of Light, and the novel as well appeals to have a universal touch, as Balram's life could be the life of almost anyone in this downtrodden earth. In such a way this novel is a reflection of the country and the world Adiga lives in.

The oscillation within “a thin small man” (13), who is of course Balram in Dark and a “Fat and potbellied man” (13) who is in fact Balram in Light, remarks the pendulum of a country oscillating between Dark and Light. “India is two countries in one; an India of Light, and an India of Darkness” (14). Born in such a place of contradictions Balram makes his every possible move to envision his father, Vikram Halwai's dream:

My whole life I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine – at least one – should live like a man” (30).

However leaping to the height by surpassing, “the Buffalo” (24)—the landlord in Laxmangarh, “the Stork” (24)—the owner of the river that flowed outside the village, “the Wild Boar (25)—owner of the good agricultural land around Laxmangarah, and “the Raven” (25)—the owner of the dry land is not an easy walk. These wild animals in the human form would not allow the downtrodden to rise up.

The subaltern people in Laxmangarah are oppressed by the upper class masters as it is seen in the position of the rickshaw pullers who are made to sit while they wait at the bus stop to pick up their passengers. However, Balram is able to walk above this class because from the beginning he aspired to scale higher. “I am a man of action and change” (5). Even though he has been deprived from receiving his formal education, he has turned out to be a self-taught man. He has taken every minute of his experience; in his school or at the tea-shop where he broke coal or in his master Ashok's house or from his other driving servants; a lesson. ‘I haven't read any books, but I've read all the ones that count’ (6).

Balram is not only a self-taught man but also a self-made man. Born into a family which has no responsibility to name the child; Balram grows as Munna; a common name to refer a male child; until he receives his name from his school teacher.

‘Munna? That's not a real name’

He was right: it just means ‘boy’

‘That's all I've got, sir’. I said.

It was true. I'd never been given a name.

‘Didn't your mother name you?’

‘She's very ill, sir. She lies in bed and spews blood. She's got no time to name me.’

‘And your father?’

‘He's a rickshaw-puller, sir. He's got no time to name me.’

‘Don't you have a granny? Aunts? Uncles?’

‘They've got no time either.’

The teacher turned aside and spat – a jet of red *pan* splashed the ground of the class room. He licked his lips.

‘Well, it's up to me, then isn't it?’ he passed his hand through his hair and said, ‘We'll call you...Ram. Wait – don't we have a Ram in this class? I don't want any confusion. It'll be Balram. (13)

When he goes home and tells his new name to his father; he replies: “If it’s what he wants, then we’ll call you that” (14). India has shaped many countries like China; a country that was influenced by Buddhism—a religion that was originated in India in Gaya, the district from which Balram hails. But in the same town there are people who ignore to name their children. “There’s just us and an ocean of darkness around us” (8). Many people still live in darkness. As Balram narrates; “You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in darkness” (14). Growing in a family which out of 36, 0000,004 available God to worship but foists Lord Hanuman to be worshiped sincerely as He was a sincere servant to the Lord Rama and Sita, and therefore Balram like his ancestors should be as sincere and dutiful to his master. He struggles hard to come out of this religious colouring to win his freedom and emerge as ‘*The White Tiger*’ as envisioned by the School Inspector.

You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?..The White Tiger. ‘That’s what you are in this jungle’. (35)

Balram becomes *The white Tiger* but in an injustice way. Entangled to the exposure of bribery from his younger days and disappointment at the forsaken role models; the conductor Vijay and his master Ashok; Balram is poisoned to win through his dishonest action. When Vijay mounted from the Pig herds community; a lowest of the lowest community; Balram followed him as his role model and longed to become one day like him.

I wanted to be like Vijay – with a uniform, a pay cheque, a shiny whistle with a piercing sound, and people looking at me with eyes that said, *How important he looks*. (31)

Balram’s master Ashok was so full of milk of human compassion with no trace of his father’s or his brother’s upper class cruelty that made Balram to worship his master as Lord Rama and his wife Pinky as Goddess Sita. But when Vijay turns out to be a corrupted politician and his master Ashok tends to lose all his morality and humanness to entrap Balram in the accident case committed by Pinky; Balram loses all his faith in them and starts to follow their wickedness in climbing higher.

Balram’s first exposure to corruption was from his school master.

There was supposed to be a free food at my school – a government programme gave every boy three *rotis*, yellow *dall* and pickles at lunchtime. But we never ever saw *rotis* or *dall*, or pickles and everyone knew why: the school teacher had stolen our lunch money. (32-33)

The school teacher had his legitimate excuse to steal the money since he was not paid his salary by the government.

The corruption of the landlord had taken away Balram’s school education. The Stork wanted every member of his family to work for him to repay the loan which the family had borrowed on Balram cousin Reena’s wedding. So Balram the little school boy who was dreaming to go on a scholarship for a better education has been snatched away from his dream and taken to the tea-shop as a servant. Balram was heartbroken by his fellow students’ comment: “What is the creature that comes along only once in a generation?...’The Coal breaker’(37).

In an interview, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states that:

...subaltern is not just a classy word for “oppressed”, for [the] Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie...In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is

subaltern—a space of difference. (Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa (1992), 29)

Bairam's access to scholarship is taken away and he is forced to accept his subaltern status even though he aspired to become a different person from his group.

The corruption in the health centres had taken away Balram's fathers' life.

He had been ill for some time, but there is no hospital in Laxmangarh, although there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections. (47)

On the way to the hospital, in the boat, across the river, throughout his spitting blood Balram's father was helpless with the natural resources too. Balram and his brother Kishan kept washing his mouth with the water from the river. "But the water was so polluted that made him spit more blood" (47). THE LOHIA UNIVERSAL FREE HOSPITAL is the best part of the corrupted India.

There were three black goats sitting on the steps to the large, faded white building; the stench of goat faces wafted out from the open door. The glass in most of the windows was broken; a cat was striking out at us from one cracked window. (48)

Added to the appearance of the building, the functioning of the building is even more pathetic with no doctor's sincere work.

There was no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy after we bribed ten rupees said that a doctor might come in the evening. (48)

The medical superintendent who is to supervise the attendance of the doctors comes to the post by bribing the politicians. So they seek their returns and do not care for the good working of the hospital.

There's a government medical superintendent who's meant to check the doctor's visit village hospitals like this. Now each time this post falls vacant, the Great Socialist lets all the big doctors know that he's having an open auction for the post. The growing rate of this post is about four hundred thousand rupees these days.

The person who chairs this post makes his juniors to wave their work and own their private clinic by giving the superintendent a part of their salary.

Arvind Adiga has portrayed the tri-colour of India: India of Greatness, India of Light and India of Darkness. If Edward Said's "*Orientalism*" conceptually addresses the domination of The Other, by means of colonialism and the Us-and-Them binary social relation as a foundation of colonialism, based on the Orient and Occident—the Eastern and western countries; Arvind Adiga's social binary division is more civilian. The bifurcation is held within the people of the same country due to its upheaval social set-up. From the zoo law it practiced before the invasion of the British it has jumped into the jungle law after the independence. In this jungle law, people had only two destinies. "Eat – or get eaten up" (64). So he allows his character to escape from being eaten up by the social inequalities and moulds him to eat the injustice. Balram kills his master and becomes an entrepreneur. But he justifies his action:

Being called Murderer: fine, I have no objection to that. It's a fact: I am a sinner, a fallen human. But to be called a murderer by the police! (102)

On the day of election when a mad man went to hammer a banner, Vijay and the police man stamped on his face to death. If the police-man can do so how could he call Balram a murderer?

Balram a coward and a kind-hearted fellow who pleads his father's mercy to not kill the lizard; and a coward until twenty-four years to climb the Black Fort; turns wild with the inequalities he is exposed to.

The importance of social power relations in defining subaltern social groups as oppressed, racial minorities whose social presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group; as such, subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subvert the authority of the social group(s) who hegemonic power. (Homi K. Bhabha. "Unsatisfied: notes on cosmopolitanism." *Text and Nation: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities* 191)

Thus in *The White Tiger* Arvind Adiga allows his subaltern protagonist to subvert the authority of his imperial master Ashok by killing him and stealing his money to standardize his position in the society.

In *Toward a New Legal Common Sense* (2002), the sociologist Boavenyura de Sousa Santos applies the term subaltern cosmopolitanism to describe the counter-hegemonic practice, social movement, resistance, and struggle against neo-liberal globalization, especially the struggle against social exclusion. Similar to his work Arvind Adiga's novel shows how a subaltern takes up the life of survival by his counter-hegemonic practice.

When Ashok evades his income tax and bribes the politician with a million and half rupees Balram thinks why should not he steal his master's money and become an entrepreneur. Of course he has found his voice in the society. But at what cost! He has to live his life with his fake identity with no family of his own. He might have become a successful entrepreneur. But he is definitely not a successful man. Achieving a complete success in this unequal democratic land is not possible. When the parliamentarians do not respond to the farmers appointment but give an immediate appointment to the media person and the tax-evaders; when the government is being built on the fake votes; and when the government itself allows the rich to become richer by allowing them to steal coal from the government mines, how could India make the poor to become rich? May be Balram has found his voice; however his survival is going to be a bare survival. But at least he has come out of his ordeal life to have endurance survival. But there is still thousands of Indian population left unnoticed.

Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the Darkness too – you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal – like way they live under the huge bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while cars roar past them. (119-120)

In a country which does not allow the poor to enter the shopping mall how can all the margins find their voice?

Is There No Space for the Poor in the malls of new India?

The glass doors had opened, but the man who wanted to go into them could not do so. The guard at the door had stopped him. He pointed his stick at the man's feet and shook his head – the man had sandals on his feet. But everyone who was allowed into the mall had shoes on their feet. (148)

When the servant class is so indulged within their status how could they come out of their shell? Even when Balram tries by fitting into the black jeans and tea-shirt and shoes on his feet, he struggles to have a free move in the mall after clearing his entrance.

Because the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skill, nail after nail, and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga. (193)

So unless the servant class comes out of their shell and the democracy is built on equality and fraternity; the margins attempting to find their voice is oblivious which is too obvious.

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