

## A RADICAL REPRESENTATION OF THE SUBALTERN IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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Subaltern is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling class. Subaltern classes may include persons who are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure. Subaltern theory asserts that norms are established by those in power and imposed on the 'Other' who has had no voice because of race, class or gender. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak subscribes to the term more specifically in the South Asian context. She applies the term subaltern to those groups that are subordinated in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office and the like (Ashcroft 215). Homi Bhabha emphasises 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 hold hegemonic power.

The word subaltern combines the Latin terms for 'under' (sub) and 'other' (alter) which literally means 'of inferior rank'. The subaltern studies historians like Ranajit Guha, Shahid Amin and Partha Chatterjee argued that India had achieved political independence from the British Empire without corresponding social revolution in the class system it had originally hoped for. Gayatri Spivak also agrees with the argument of subaltern studies historians but adds that their lingering Marxist approach to social and historical change effectively privileges the male subaltern subject as the primary agent of change.

Despite the great diversity of the subaltern groups, the one invariant feature was a notion of resistance to elite domination. The failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation meant that the nation of India failed to 'come into its own', and for Guha 'it is the study of this failure which constitutes the central problematic of Indian historiography' (qtd. in Bill Ashcroft et.al 217). The concept of the subaltern focuses on the general distinction between subaltern and elite because Guha contends that this subaltern group is invariably overlooked in studies of political and cultural change.

This paper attempts to make a deep searching study into the representation of the subaltern in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Adiga is the recipient of the Man Booker Prize 2008 and he made his presence strongly felt in the group of young Indian writers with his debut novel *The White Tiger*. His way of writing has a sting that pricks the conscience of Indians and this has paved the way for criticism as well as much acclaim in the world of Indian writing.

Adiga, justifies his novel in an interview: "At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac, Dickens

did in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do- it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self- examination"(“Review : The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga”, The Telegraph).

The novel *The White Tiger* is an intuitive study of the life and struggles of the subaltern, brought about by the great divide that exists between the haves and the have-nots. Set against the backdrop of the economic boom in India, this novel is a powerful critique of Indian democracy. The novel is a series of unanswered letters from Balram Halwai to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier who is scheduled to visit India soon. It radicalises our understanding of the socio-political scene of contemporary India. The novelist powerfully dwells on the theme of oppression through the metaphor of rooster coop. The plot of the novel moves both ways; backward and forward through flash-back and flash-forward techniques.

The narrator, Balram Halwai, believes that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man as, the ‘white skinned man’ has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse. India of Light with all its affluence and luxurious life is depicted in the novel as an emerging entrepreneurial power in the world with its rapid advancement in the field of science and technology. Delhi, the capital city of India is praised as the Young America. Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel observes:

My humble prediction: in twenty year's time, it will be just us yellow men and brown men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the whole world (305).

The narrative may be viewed as a social commentary and a study of injustice in the form of class struggle meted out to the subjugated group. The anti-hero Balram, represents the downtrodden sections of the Indian society while his masters like Ashok and the feudal Lords represent the rich. Adiga with the pride and distinctiveness of a ‘white tiger’ preys upon some of the burning issues of our society like casteism, class struggle and the consequent oppression of the subalterns. The novel provides a darkly humorous picture of India through a retrospective narration of Balram Halwai. The title ‘The White Tiger’ symbolically suggests the transformation of the oppressed and the dominated into the oppressor and the dominator. The novelist offers the meaning of the ‘White Tiger’ as “the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation” (35). The novel clearly states that it is an exhausting struggle for the low class people to break out of their oppressive cultural background of upper caste domination and to seek success in life. It also suggests that only a small percentage of poor people will prosper in their life like the *white tiger* in traditional Indian society.

It was a school inspector who called Balram Halwai - the ‘White Tiger’ as he proved himself to be the smartest boy in the class. The inspector gifted him a book “Lessons for Young Boys from the life of Mahatma Gandhi” and assured him a scholarship for higher studies. Later on, when Balram became an entrepreneur he named his taxi company “The White Tiger Drivers”. The Tiger is a cruel and wild animal that eats the flesh of other creatures to survive. In the same way Balram killed his own master to grab the potential of the ‘India of Light’. Throughout the book, there are references to show how Balram is very different from those in his home environment. A white tiger symbolizes power, freedom and individuality. Balram is an exceptional character with an indomitable will to climb up the ladders of success.

Aravind Adiga, in tune with *Pamela*, the first English novel written by Samuel Richardson, has used the epistolary form for *The White Tiger*. Adiga explains the reason like this:

It is a story he can never tell anyone because it involves murder in the real life; now he tells it when no one is around. Like all Indians, who are obsessed (A colonial legacy, probably) with the outsider's gaze he is stimulated to think about his country and society by the imminent arrival of a foreigner, and an important one. So he talks about himself and his country in the solitude of his room. (*The Sunday Times*, April 6, 2008).

Through the novel Adiga tries to bring into notice the issues of subaltern and their miserable condition before the world audience. He exposes the trials and tribulations in the life of the oppressed and subjugated people of India.

The theory of resistance or subversion is the major theme in *The White Tiger*. A master-servant relationship exists between Balram and Ashok. His transformation begins with his resistance to the exploitation done to him by his grandmother Kusum and his masters: the Stork, the Mongoose (Mukesh) and the Lamb (Ashok). Laxmangarh is always addressed as the darkness and only poor people live there. They worshipped Hanuman because, "He is a shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love and devotion" (19).

The plot of the novel lingers around Balram Halwai in Adiga's imaginative village Laxmangarh, where the villagers, family and friends are subjected to exploitation, torture and torment and treated as the other by the village landlords. Balram by nature is ambitious and tries to improve his social position. His exposure and acquaintance with the rich ways of life at an extremely wealthy family makes him all the more ambitious. This ambition which is deep rooted in him brings him to Delhi as the driver of one of landlord's westernised son, Ashok. The desire to be a part of that glamorous world, the India of Light grows more and more intense in him. At any cost he wants to escape from servitude and subordination. Poverty should perish. The plight of his family should not haunt him again. An identity should be created.

Delhi is the place where Balram feels the great gap between rich and poor and between two castes: the men with the big bellies and men with the small bellies, those who eat and those who are eaten. A rich man and a poor man's body is clearly demarcated in the novel:

A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different, my father's spine was a knotted rope....The story of poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen (27).

All these social, political and economic disparities gradually inculcate in Balram's mind the spirit of revolt, resistance and vengeance, which remained suppressed for some time in his unconscious mind. His father's plan or cherished dream for his son might have inspired him constantly to resist and improve his subordinate condition. "And when you see these strict men, think of my father. Rickshaw-puller is a human beast of burden- but my father was a man with a plan. I was his plan (27). "When he caught his breath", he said, "my whole life, I have been treated like donkey. All I want is that one son of mine- at least one-should live like a man" (30).

The novel exposes the cobwebs of casteism and class consciousness which is deeply rooted in Indian society. In the novel, Balram's position is that of a subaltern who belongs to the deprived section of society and a low caste, Halwai, whose hereditary profession is to make sweets. He is the mouthpiece of the marginalised and the poverty stricken people of India. Adiga, through Balram Halwai presents how the low caste people are treated by the high caste people and how he struggles to escape from the strangle hold of oppression. The high class people with their authority of domination exploit and oppress the subjugated lower caste and lower class people. Balram cherished the dream to enter the restricted domain created by the oppressor and

revolts and gets success and recognition at the cost of a person's life. Balram's success though through immoral means epitomises the voice of the hitherto oppressed class.

The story commences from Bihar (Darkness) and ends up at Bangalore, symbolically from darkness to light, exposing two Indias. *The White Tiger* takes us on a journey with the narrator Balram Halwai from his birthplace Laxmangarh, via Dhanbad and Delhi to Bangalore where he finally feels content to think, "I'm in light now". However the world of light has got undercurrents of darkness also, all the people of 'light' are not morally enlightened, similarly all the people in the so called 'darkness' are not morally deprived. The novel paints a vivid and disturbing picture of life in the modern India. Even when the country is growing as a great economic power, a vast number of its inhabitants still lead a miserable life without even the basic amenities of life like food, water, shelter and clothing. They are deprived of their right to education, health care and a better living condition. They cannot even dream of the cosy and comfortable life of the elite.

The landlords- the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Raven are the feudal masters who determine the course of life of the low caste people and their treatment of the low caste people is worse than the treatment given to animals. When Balram brutally handles two Pomeranians in chains he is chided by the Nepali servant: "Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!"(78). Such humiliating comments pierce into Balaram's consciousness and intensifies his desire to establish an identity of his own.

Exploitation is rampant in politics too. Even as India is celebrated as the biggest democracy in the world, democratic principles are flown to the air. The poor has no freedom to cast their vote. Instead, on the day of voting, they are brought like herds and do whatever they are asked to do. They are subjected to rules set by the hegemonic group and destined to follow their commands. Balram aptly comments, "like eunuchs discussing the *Kama Sutra*, the voters discuss elections in Laxmangarh" (98).

Balram sheds the weight and limitations of his sordid and unpleasant past and overcomes the social obstacles that has chained him down to slavery, preventing him from living life to the fullest possible extent. The novel records his journey from the darkness of Laxmangarh to the light of freedom in India's modern day capitalist society. The words of the Muslim poet Iqbal "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world" (40) reverberate in him. Balram sees himself as the one who is capable of seeing the world in all its beauty and resolves not to remain a slave. With stubborn will power and untiring optimism Balram sets out to fulfil the resolution. Leaving behind the menial job of a teashop boy, he trains himself to be a driver and becomes a chauffeur to his landlord's son Ashok. His drive with his master around the busy city of Delhi opens up before him a world of immense wealth, power and its concomitant corruption. Balram was not a mere driver to Ashok but a faithful servant as well. His devotion to his master is such that when his master's wife, in her drunken state crushed a child to death he was asked to sign a confession taking up the responsibility. The novel explicitly reveals how the dominant group in the social hierarchy exploits the poor for their selfish motives. The poor are helpless to raise their voice against their oppressor because they are aware of its aftermath which may be in the form of severe punishments or even death. Though they remain inarticulate, they have a strong desire to free themselves from the shackles of their destiny.

Balram is haunted by the scene of hens and roosters situated behind Jama Masjid and liken the plight of the downtrodden to the hens in the rooster coop waiting for their turn to be killed. They are entrapped inside the cages and have no way to escape. The analogy to the 'rooster coop' highlights the helplessness of the oppressed group.

“Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench...The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they`re next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop” (173).

Balam explains why Indian servants are so honest because of what he calls the Rooster Coop.

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – 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.(176)

Balam, the White Tiger, hitherto a loyal and faithful servant to his master learns the strategies of deception after being exposed to a brand new world of Light opened up before him in the metropolitan city. The craze to be a part of it forces him to sacrifice all the moral values that he has accrued in his life and engage in a horrible murder of his master Ashok in order to snatch the amount of money required for an entrepreneur to set up an empire of his own business. Thus, the journey from ‘Light’ to ‘Darkness’ proves to be terribly hazardous. Here, the subaltern has made a strong attempt to speak by shedding blood and gives a positive answer to Spivak`s question “Can the Subaltern Speak?”.

As long as the subaltern group are not ready to protest against exploitation they will remain in “perpetual servitude”. Balam justifies the murder of his master by saying, “I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Mr. Ashok – who, for all his numerous virtues, was not much of a master – to be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace them” (320)

After becoming a successful entrepreneur he bids farewell to all human qualities like love, compassion and sympathy. He totally disregards his siblings except his brother Kishan. The prick of conscience that he experiences for neglecting his kith and kin is well evident from his observation on the buffaloes. Watching the dead buffaloes faces, the faces of his own family comes to his mind.

The buffalo glared at me. ‘Shame!’ it said, and then it took a big step forward and the cart passed by, full of dead skinned faces, which seemed to me at that moment the faces of my own family (256)

But the picture of Indian entrepreneurs that the novel provides is mean and dark. Speaking much about India of Darkness, Adiga implies that India is completely deprived of light. It is the India of Darkness which is focused by the novelist articulating the voice of the subaltern who are relegated to the margins.

The novel has received as much accolades as criticism, Adiga who has grown up in foreign countries is in a hurry to brand India and its people as illiterate and impoverished. Not all the entrepreneurs make success through foul means. There are many who have become successful through hard work and honesty. Adiga claims that the novel is meant for awakening the conscience of India against the moral degeneration and widespread corruption.

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