

Constructing Subaltern Worldview in Aravind Adiga's *The White*

Tiger

Praveen Kumar

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

School of Arts and Humanities

Singhania University

Jhunjhunun, Rajasthan, India

shivkumarradhika@gmail.com

Abstract

The central concern for many Indian writers, settled abroad, either remains diasporic experiences or their concerns about the othering of the poor by the affluent in modern India against the backdrop of the realities of the two opposing conceptions of India: the envisioned Independent India of the post-freedom struggle and the modern India of the rich. Caste and class structures are an imperial barrier to democratic socialism and economic equality, which causes the poor to be victimized. Because they lack resources and are therefore helpless, the underprivileged continue to be used as tools of the elite capitalist class. With the background established, Adiga's *The White Tiger* holds a central position to establish the voice of the marginalized to challenge the country's booming prosperity.

This paper attempts to critically analyze *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga through a socio-political perspective to depict India's socio-cultural and political context and how the larger politics impact the micro level realities of common people. Similarly, it attempts to establish a marginalized by showcasing the life of a low-born person involved in the local politics and policy.

Keywords: Culture, Class and Caste Stratification, Ideology, Conditioning, Deviance

Introduction

In his first book, *The White Tiger* (2008), author Aravind Adiga deftly mixes the story of Indian civilization, the dehumanising state of the ordinary people, class conflict, and humanism. On October 23, 1974, he was born in Madras, and his parents, Madhava and Usha Adiga, were from Mangalore. He was an adult when he graduated from SSLC in 1990, earning the top spot in the state of Mangalore. He moved to Sydney, Australia with his family so that he could attend James Ruse Agricultural High School. He later studied English literature at Columbia College and Columbia University in New York, where he eventually received his degree in 1997. He began his career as a financial writer and intern at the Financial Times and had stories published in the Money and the Wall Street Journal in which he discussed investing and the stock market. He was a South Asia Correspondent for Times before going independent, and it was at this time that he penned *The White Tiger*, which earned him the 2008 Man Booker Prize. After Salman Rushdie for *Midnight's Children* in 1981, Arundhati Roy for *The God of Small Things* in 1997, and Kiran Desai for *Inheritance of Loss* in 2006, he becomes the fourth novelist of Indian descent to win the award.

The idea of writing a novel germinated in his mind when was living in Delhi and spending his time, visiting various historical places like Purana Quila fort near the National Zoo in Delhi. It is here that he witnessed a white tiger in a cage and his white and black strips made a tremendous impact on him that inspired him to write a novel with a title that refers to that caged tiger. In an interview with David Godwin, at the 2014 Chennai Literary Festival, he talks about how Sudhir Kakar's psychoanalysis influenced his writing. Adiga was impressed by the urban migration studies done by Kakar from the psychological perspective to lay bare the hidden truth of the human psyche where he claims that the major change that a laborer experience in his life is their control over their sexuality. Such conditioning of body and mind

is a result of various socio-economic and cultural displacements. Different territory demands and requires different kinds of adjustments with space hence an urban space would demand and follow a different set of cultural norms as compared to a space in the village that they occupied earlier. Such situations condition their psyche accordingly. This also means that the migrant has the willpower to defer his marriage, according to his financial position and economic stability, or he can easily succumb to the societal pressure and familial duties and marry someone chosen by his kinsmen in the village. This would mean his perpetual bondage to economic dependency throughout his life or he could stand against his kinsmen, antagonize them, and defer the marriage till he finds himself economically sound and stable. This proves that a migrant's life can be both a threat to the marriage as an institution and a freedom from its clutches by making his kinsmen detached which can lead to the snapping of the ties.

Similarly, Kakar asserts that when these migrant workers write to their families in villages about their lives in big urban cities, they employ animal or bird imageries to express their experience of newfound independence and liberty from village life. He asserts that it represents their newfound freedom in controlling their sexualities. Similarly, the white tiger in the zoo can mesmerize other animals in the zoo and onlookers as well. Simultaneously, it can be seen as presenting the other side of the picture as well, a free being caged for urban market consumption, controlled by the powerful people.

Kakar's studies on internal migration and its psychic effect are very much evident in the plot of the text where the rural population migrates from villages to big cities to find means of survival and socio-economic upliftment. The city becomes the land of opportunities, dreams realization, and an escape from the clutches of poverty and redundancy that seem to have stratified their lives. The city proves an escape from it but it shows the other side of the coin as well where one would experience exploitation, caste and class division, division of labour, etc.,

as here “progress often turns out to be a glaring inequality, rationality becomes selfishness and the pursuit of self-interest and individualism comes to mean unbridled greed¹.”

The White Tiger (2008)

On a similar terrain of experiences, the protagonist of *The White Tiger* is brought up in a lower caste milieu in north Indian society. He faces life and strives to come out of the vicious circle of poverty and stratification as despite having little hope of upward social mobility, he survives and becomes prosperous. Unlike millions who reel under the pressure of caste structure and class that keep them chained to a vicious circle of poverty and exploitation, he comes as a symbol of movement by breaking away from this chain. The text revolves around the issue of caste, class, ethnicity, marginality, exploitation, and dependency. These are the roots of various socio-cultural marginalities that further the centre and peripheral existence.

History seen from the subaltern perspective, from the bottom of society, is counter to the elite historiography that resorts to eliminating the subalterns from the history books a concept introduced by Antonio Gramsci. Sumit Sarkar calls this process ‘historical elision’ where the presence of subaltern is not recorded or given space for representation, as a result, they remain, unrepresented and unvoiced. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, in their work on subaltern studies, demonstrate the urgency and need for creating a subaltern discourse to reclaim the history of the marginalized and rewrite histories from their perspectives that seem to be missing from master narratives or historiographies.

The White Tiger, a text, puts the subaltern tale into perspective by revealing the ongoing presence of the centre and periphery, as well as the impoverished and privileged class, which denies those who are from the lower class of society the fundamental rights associated with being a human. It is based on the binary opposition of developmental imperialism, a western

¹ Colabert, Jade. Review: Aravind Adiga’s Selection Day is a polyphonous novel about contemporary India. The Globe and Mail. January, 13, 2017. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-aravind-adigas-selection-day-is-a-polyphonous-novel-about-contemporary-india/article33614728/>

ideological apparatus in the name of development that thrives on the principle of binary opposition. It further exacerbates the established binary relation of the dominance of the West on non-western nations, as Ashcroft writes,

A simple distinction between centre/margin; colonizer/colonized; metropolis/empire; civilized/primitive represents very efficiently the violent hierarchy on which imperialism is based and which it actively perpetuates. Binary oppositions are structurally related to one another, and in colonial discourse there may be a variation of the one underlying binary- colonizer/colonized - that becomes rearticulated in any particular text in a number of ways, e.g. Colonizer: colonized white: black civilized: primitive advanced: retarded good: evil beautiful: ugly human: bestial teacher: pupil doctor: patient. (Ashcroft, 2007, 19)

The binary concept was established by Ferdinand Saussure based on signs that

Signs have meaning not by a simple reference to real objects, but by their opposition to other signs. Each sign is itself the function of a binary between the signifier, the 'signal' or sound image of the word, and the signified, the significance of the signal, the concept or mental image that it evokes. (cited in Ashcroft, 2007, 18)

Gayatri Spivak coined the term 'othering' to describe various ideological methods that colonial discourses employ to maintain the binary division through discourses of power and knowledge to produce colonial subjects. These colonial subjects are always perceived and presented as opposed to western enlightenment and civilization. The novel probes the same binary from the class perspective to understand the socio-cultural differences that the ruling class perpetuates and maintains to differentiate itself from the working class population. Ania Loomba explicates the ideology behind the process of otherization as,

The othering of vast numbers of people, and their construction as backward and inferior depended upon what Abdul JanMohammed calls the Manichean allegory', in which a

binary and implacable discursive opposition between races is produced (1985:60). Such oppositions.....are crucial not only for creating images of the outsider but equally essential for constructing the insider, the (usually white European male) self. (Loomba, 1998, 104)

The text constructively represents the subaltern figure and establishes the binary oppositions of the self and the other, within a specific existence of the class and society that is a significant cause of prejudice against the lower section. Balram, the protagonist, belongs to this class that aspires to socio-economically mobilize its status by engaging in city life. The binary oppositions that the text establishes can be categorized as,

Master and Servant,

City and Village,

Rich and Poor,

India of Light and India of Darkness,

River and Ocean, and

Family and Individual.

It is the portrayal of the dark side that wins the text its praise and shocks the readers. The agrarian class structure is central to the text that provides it its structure and discourse.

The land is the principal means of production in an agrarian society that also determines and reflects on the caste and class divide based on the accessibility and ownership of the land and its size. The text describes the class issue entangled with the caste issue and the ownership of the land as it determines the caste status of a person. Caste is a pervasive phenomenon in India that determines the social, economic, and cultural status of a person and community. It is also a base through which the exploitation of a particular section of society is justified and perpetuated. Balram Halwai is a product of such a deeply divided society where the downtrodden struggle to survive in their day-to-day struggle and experience humiliation at the

hands of their superiors. He attempts to expose and tries to understand the rationale behind the phenomenon in modern India where the poorer are getting poorer and richer are getting richer day by day. The knowledge that he gains is the exploitation of the poor and various apparatuses at their privilege through which they become richer at the expense of the poor. It is a major humanity issue faced by the poor in India.

Balram takes up the responsibility of making the right the wrong that keeps the poor people at receiving end and he rights it by killing his master. He rationalizes it by the logic that the class divide can only be escaped and overcome by modernization. The preferable escape route that works for him is killing and stealing through which he imagines achieving equality and socio-economic mobility. He understands that a person with the neoliberal approach in a globalized scenario is a powerful being in the contemporary world.

Being poor and conscious about his existence he understands the importance of neoliberal globalization which can be utilized as a boon for upward mobility. He kills and steals, which can be seen as unethical, criminal, and immoral. His action violets the basic human rights, the notion of humanity, and the value of human life, which he was not the one to take. But the narrative justifies the action when it presents the narration from the perspective of the bottom, from Balram's perspective, a downtrodden, who, like others, experiences the horrors of underdevelopment, inequality based on class and caste hierarchy and the discrimination associated with being untouchable. His actions from his perspective justify the killing and stealing within the text.

The white tiger in the zoo is a rare being amid poaching and symbolizes courage that cannot be matched with any other being. For Balram, it symbolizes courage with which he identifies and finds himself, just like the tiger, caged in various tentacles of class and caste cages. It is the society that has caged the tiger and in an extended version Balram also.

Similarly, the roosters in a coop symbolize the poor, underdogs, downtrodden, and marginalized masses of India, as he writes,

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 stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. 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. (Adiga, 2008, 173)

Similarly, the butcher stands for the rich, exploitative and the ruling class of India. They exploit the poor and create conditions through which the poor remain poor or become poorer but they expand their empire.

Similarly, one can find a pervasive environment of confusion and mistrust between other characters and the protagonist. Balram at an early age experiences tragedies that change his worldview. In the process of development, where he is a part of a dark world, he dreams to live a respected and dignified life that was inculcated in him by his parents. He experiences the death of his mother as a little boy and finds the family guilty of her condition. His father as well died due to tuberculosis as he could not get proper care and medical attention in a government hospital. Such incidents create an adverse impression on the protagonist and he loses trust in family and society as at one point in the narrative he states that nobody can be trusted entirely or believed in contemporary India.

The difference between families and societies gets blurred when it comes to the treatment of an individual in it. A family is supposed to inculcate human values, morality, and love in a family member, but sometimes its action impacts a person oppressively. Their actions

oppress a person and lead to curtailing financial independence and freedom. Similarly, societal dictates attempt to bind an individual to cultural and traditional practices that hamper growth until one resists such pressures. In such acculturation, and the class struggle in contemporary India, characters like Balram attempt to radically transform the society and its practices by resorting to unethical practices to counter class and cultural apartheid. His journey from a poor tea boy in the village of Laxmangarh to becoming an entrepreneur in Bangalore city is a saga of blood and treachery. He is initially mesmerized by the religious and cultural environment in his master's family. He respects and reveres them which expose the servile mentality of the servant class. The narrative compares both his master and mistress to Lord Rama and his consort Sita and Balram considers himself as Hanuman, ready to sacrifice his life to protect the family of his master. He feels that by devoting himself to the well-being of his master he would fulfill his duty and in return, his master would perform his duty by taking care of him in return. When the narrative progresses, later he realizes that his master is self-centered and selfish and can sacrifice his servant for his benefit. That leads to a reflection on the master-servant relationship and the class issues. He comes to a belief that by keeping and exploiting the poor section, rich people become richer at the expense of the downtrodden section. This reflection turns the table and motivates the protagonist to solve this endemic issue of poverty. It results in his acting selfishly like his master and he starts stealing from him. It results in killing his master, Ashok, and escaping with money that was kept to pay a bribe to various public sector offices to evade tax.

Bhabha's formulations of hybridity and the third space can be used here to further elaborate on the spatiality of the body, his interaction with the space as a doer, and hybridity. It is the spatiality of the body in the text where the protagonist encounters past and present that blends into sequences to explicate the post-colonial identities in a globalized world. It is within this spatiality of body, within the space of the text, that the exploited and oppressed characters

resist colonization and celebrate their freedom from servitude. It is in the office room for Balram, that the third space comes into existence where he remembers his stand for liberation from servitude. It is here that the binaries come together, of past and present, liberated from the oppressive past and its adjoined experiences, and the space that he occupies embodies that sense of freedom and present. Here he becomes an extension of himself within its space as the office room becomes a space of comingling of various binaries in the text. The future and the past harmoniously converge into the present where he presents his narratives with ease and comfort. It is this third space, a vantage point for observing the world realistically and authentically.

The text represents the struggles of the protagonist to forge his identity and social, economic, and cultural identity to lead a life of luxury. His life trajectory demonstrates that in a globalized world, it is difficult for genuine and straightforward people, especially those who belong to the lower strata of society in India, to survive and prosper. Balram was meritorious and one of the most intelligent students in the school but the rigid social structure and poverty stood against his mobility and getting higher education. In a way, society and its conditions deny him an opportunity for upward mobility. The text reflects on social stratification and its rigid structure in contemporary India. The dominant upper class and caste section exercises monopoly over policy decisions and they make such policies that benefit them through which they subjugate the downtrodden class. The novel is an attempt to explore the widespread corruption and poverty against the backdrop of the 1990s economic boom in India. The narrative focuses on how these two aberrations, poverty, and corruption, have corrupted Indian society, and the dominant class and caste people get favor while the deprived sections are deprived of education and health. The dominant section received benefits by denying the justice to poor. The text also unravels the dark truth of entrepreneurship in India that plays with the

lives of poor people and costs many lives. As a self-taught entrepreneur, the narrator describes himself by using symbols from people's lives who face struggle and live life on a daily basis.

Adiga describes the land of darkness where the deprived section of the country continues to live in deprivation and poverty. Unlike others, Balram thinks resourcefully and is driven towards an ambition of leading a life of affluence and happiness that he sees in the land of light. He feels lured toward the high-class life style and their culture. He does not feel happy about his present situation and thinks to change it by whatever means. Similarly, to achieve this state, just like his master, he does not hesitate to sacrifice his relations for his advantage or lead a fatalistic life where he could feel satisfied with whatever means he gets to survive within a limited means. Unlike many who resign to their fate and lead a pessimistic life, he always feels yearning towards affluence. He does not believe in morality or ethics and is willing to sacrifice anything to achieve it. He robs and kills his master despite knowing that his action can jeopardize the lives of his family members.

In the text, *The White Tiger*, Balram is inspired and aspired to achieve and become what his master has achieved in his life. He feels more drawn towards his master than Pinky madam's snobbish ways of life. Ashok symbolizes the perfect who could be imitated through which he could achieve his dreams and fulfill his desires. He copies his dressing style and the way he walks and talks. He does not stop at imitating his styles but he also approaches a European lookalike call girl to imitate his master's one-night stand with a Russian call girl who looked like a famous American actress. His metamorphosis into Ashok takes place when he murders him and takes away his money to become an entrepreneur in Bangalore city.

According to the author, the master-servant relationship in India implies binary opposition in all possible senses where the servant would be poor and would never, in his lifetime; catch up with the socio-economic status of his master. The poor will remain poor and the master would continuously get richer. Adiga also observes that his divide is so huge it

cannot be abridged easily, shortly and someone reaching near or even below their status is considered to be rare or their resistance against such monopoly is even rarer. Similarly, the servant killing his master is not a daily occurrence but the servant getting exploited, raped, punished, etc., are common occurrences in the urban environment in India. The dominant section treats the subaltern with derisive thoughts, meanness, and someone not deserving. They would not want to spend an extra penny on their development or progress and they are the first to be looked at suspiciously whenever a single penny gets missed in the house. A similar incident qualifies this claim when the master's brother loses a one-rupee coin in the car. He orders Balram to search the car and Balram, like a sniffing dog, started searching for it, as he says, "I sniffed in between the mats like a dog, all in search of that one rupee. Finally, I took a rupee coin out of my shirt pocket, dropped it on the floor of the car, picked it up, and gave it to the Mongoose" (Adiga, 2008, 139).

This scene reflects how the dominant section thinks about the servant class. They are always suspicious and paranoid about the belief that the servant might steal from them, or rob their valuable asset, and act harshly to restrain them from rising against them. In a similar instance, Balram was forbidden to play music or switch on the ac inside the car while his master is not around. But they would not miss the opportunity to exploit him and make fun of him. At one point, when Ashok's wife kills a child of a street dweller, in a drunken state, Balram is forced to accept the entire responsibility of the accident and a confession document. Not only that they even make fun of his accent as he would mispronounce words like 'pizza' or 'mall'. Such a continuous trap of exploitation conditions their mind to servitude, to a state of resignation to fate and acceptance of fate, where they do not question the exploitation that they experience in their daily lives and do not gather the courage to stand against such treatments.

Usually, people belonging to the servant class come from untouchable communities due to their socio-economic and cultural status. They work hard and strive to survive in a

predominantly casteist society where the socio-cultural believe treat them below their caste superiority whose sole purpose of being born on the earth is to serve the dominant caste people. In the contemporary Indian scenario, the dominant caste communities exercise a monopoly over natural and state resources. The poor people remain dependent on them for survival and conform to the socio-cultural dictates as “under these punitive conditions, the body of the untouchable is moulded in a given environment to assimilate its culture and its position. It performs tasks according to its dictates and accepts caste discrimination passively” (Kumar, 2022, 4). As a result, the dominant sections exercise power over the poor and downtrodden. Their condition as dependent on survival in the dominant caste and class resists any kind of resistance against exploitation and discrimination. Even if they attempt to raise their voices against the exploitative power of the dominant caste and class they are easily defeated by dominants by using physical force or state powers. ‘Precarity’ comes to define their existence in such a socio-cultural scenario (Kumar, ‘Precarity Redefined’).

Conclusion

The text is a subversive and subaltern narrative of an underclass member who strives and succeeds as an entrepreneur by altering the class as well as caste position. He transforms from being a casteized subject as Balram Halwai, a son of a rickshaw puller, a mere driver to a successful entrepreneur, to a businessman in Bangalore, indicating the rise of a subaltern irrespective of which way he has taken for the mobility. He mobilizes his class position as well as caste status by transforming from a casteized subject as Balram Halwai to Ashok Sharma, an upper caste identity that provides his easy accessibility and acceptability in a large caste-conscious environment. This strategy to counter the perennial disparity, based on caste and class, is surpassed by wearing the caste identity of a dominant caste, snatched from a dominant class and caste employer, through which he enters into the sacrosanct market space which is mostly dominated by dominant caste and class. His action also subverts the dominant class and

caste ideological pedagogy and control through which the downtrodden and subaltern are kept at the receiving end of society. He uses their strategies of exploiting the masses, which he uses on them, and transforms himself into a self-styled entrepreneur, and assumes an identity to stay away from the clutches of law.

IJELLH

References

- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. Free Press, New York. 2008. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2nd ed. Routledge, New York. 2007. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge Classic, New York. 2007. Print.
- Kakar, Sudhir. *The Essential Sudhir Kakar*. Oxford, University Press, India. 2011. Print
- Kumar, S. 'Precarity Redefined: A Reading of Bama's Karukku and Gaikwad's Uchalya: The Branded.' *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities, IJELLH, Vol. 7, Issue 7, July, 2019*. pp. 873-888.
- Kumar, Shiv. 'Becoming Dalit Women's Voice: Engaging with self-reflective narrative in Bama's Karukku' *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*. September, 05, 2022. 1-14. Sage Publication Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X221117406>
- Leitch, Vincent B. "Michael Foucault". *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, New York. 2001. Print.
- Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, London. 1998.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Edited by Bill Ashcroft, et al. Routledge, London. 1995. Decolonize, www.decolonize.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/postcolonial-studies-reader.pdf. Web.