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Dipak Chandra Jana

Teacher

Vidyasagar University

Haldia , West Bengal, India.

dipakchandrajana@gmail.com

The Hanuman Myth in Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

Abstract

Like Joyce's Ulysses, Adiga exploits ancient myth in his Booker winning novel The White Tiger. He uses the Hanuman myth of Valmiki's The Ramayana to show the contrast of master-servant relationship in the heroic age and that of post modern age. The myth helps him to explain the Rooster Coop mentality of the Indians. He frankly exposes how people are kept passive in the name of religion. Servants behave hypocritically only to please their masters. They have a mixed feeling towards their masters. They use their masters, if they can, to rise upper echelons of society. The protagonist of the novel Balram Halwai does not hesitate to slit his master, Mr. Ashok to rise the ladder. Not only the servants, but the masters also deviate from the righteous path. They ask their servants to bear the burden of their own crime. Adiga has successfully exploited mythological materials to present social materials. He portrays parallel characters to parody the archetypal figures of Valmiki.

Keywords : Rama, Hanuman, master, servant.

In general a myth is a story which is not "true" and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings – or at any rate supra- human beings. In its central modern significance , however, a myth is one story in a mythology _ a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group , and which served to explain why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances , and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.

Valmiki in his great epic The Ramayana created the character of Hanuman who was utterly obedient and respectful to his master Rama , the hero of the epic. Balram Halwai , the protagonist of Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger , sarcastically explains to Mr. Jiabao , the Premiere of China:

"...you will find an image of a saffron coloured creature , half man half monkey : this is Hanuman , every one 's favourite god in the Darkness . Do you know about Hanuman, sir?

He was the faithful servant of the god Rama , and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity , love and devotion.

These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us, Mr. Jiabao. Understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India.”(19)

As away to keep the masses passive , people are told to worship Hanuman .Religion is criticised by Karl Marx as “the opiate of the masses”, and is shown to full effect with Hinduism.A servant’s loyalty ,”the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy.”(75)Adiga presents the issue of servitude as the fundamental characteristic of Indian people and he amalgamates the myth of Hanuman effectively with the issue.It helps him to explain the Rooster Coop mentality of the Indians:

“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 with a curse .”(175-76)Hanuman in The Ramayana was also a strong and talented creature. He was absolutely faithful to his master Rama.

In Ulysses, James Joyce presents his hero Leopold Bloom as modern Ulysses. Ulysses of Homer and Bloom of Joyce are not the same though there are some parallels between them.Likewise Adiga does not portray modern Rama i.e. Mr. Ashok and Hanuman i.e. Balram Halwai with the same pen as Valmaki did . To impress Ram Persad , the number one driver of Mr. Ashok’s family ,as a devotee Balram “bought two dozen of the cheapest idols of Hanuman and Ram...and packed them into the room..”(77)Balram pretends to show his devotion to gods.His actual intention is to please his master.Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam would sit in the back and Balram “would drive them wherever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant-god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress , Ram and Sita.”(46) While returning from Laxmangarh ,”The two of them kept an eye open for every tree or temple we passed by ,and turned to me for a reaction of piety – which I gave them...They were convinced I was the most religious servant on earth.”(90)

As a servant Balram tried to impress Mr.Ashok .He told the caretaker of Laxmangarh mansion, “I love Mr. Ashok so much you must let me serve him lunch!”(82)Mr. Ashok unlike his father (the Stork)and brother(Mukesh Sir) loves Balram well.He has somewhat Rama like attitude towards Balram.But Balram’s attitude towards his master excludes any humanity,financial terms being the only ones considered. When Mr. Ashok ponders over the “the point of living”, Balram answers spontaneously :”The point of your living is that if you die ,who’s going to pay me three and a half thousands rupees amonth?”(186) As Mukesh Sir

left Delhi , the skirts of Pinky Madam became shorter and Balram feels ,”...my beak was aroused “ although he knew “master and mistress are like father and mother”.(143)So modern day Hanuman (Balram) is as different as modern day Sita(Pinky Madam).

The worst example of rooster coop in the novel is to be found when Pinky Madam hits a poor child with aspeeding vehicle. The crime of killing a child is thrust upon Balram and he is asked to willingly accept it.Adiga harshly criticizes the servants’ positive valuing of the injustice committed to them :”Doesn’t the driver family protest ?Far from it .They would actually go about bragging.[...]He was loyal as a dog. He was the perfect servant.”(169)That Balram eventually comes out of this broil is another story; the incident explicitly pinpoints the rooster coop.Balram cannot decide “Do we loathe our masters behind a facade of love – or do we love them behind a facade of loathing ?

We are made mysteries to ourselves by the Rooster Coop we are locked in.”(187)

Faith is fatal for modern Rama and Sita . So when Mr. Ashok says ,”I was faithful to Pinky –my wife-the whole time”, the minister’s assistant, the fat man sarcastically replies,”Faithfuiiy married. No wonder it ended in divorce.”(215).

Balram confesses to having become a” citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity,and wickedness,” cheating on his master.Balram’s childhood ideal fulfilled – a uniform and a good master.But anew sense of beauty is being figured out, a new and different ideal replaces the old one.He enjoys the comfort of Honda City car, company of women(prostitutes) and luxury of shopping mall .Iqbal has written about slaves , “They remain slaves because they cannot see what is beautiful in this world.”(40)Even as a boy Balram could see what was beautiful in the world and he said ,”I was destined not to stay a slave”.(41)The visit at the zoo proves a new opportunity for a revelatory insight , Iqbal’s verses recurring premonitorily:”The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world , you stop being a slave.”(275)Balram produces his philosophy ;”Let animals live like animals ; let humans live like humans”,(276) has visual contact with the white tiger, faints soon after and then, in a letter to Granny , cries :”I can’t live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny.I’m so sorry.”(278)Soon after he slits his master’s throat and runs away to Bangalore with his bloody money. Balram experiences no remorse in betraying Rama, Mr. Ashok’s principal chauffeur, on his way to fulfilling the new ideal of freedom . To justify his action he remembers a story he heard at a train station:

“One day a cunning Brahmin , trying to trick the Buddha , asked him , ‘Master do you consider yourself a man or a god?

The Buddha smiled and said , 'Neither . I am just one who has woken up while the rest of you are still sleeping.'(315) Likewise he also considers himself neither a demon nor a man. He has woken up. He also says , 'All I wanted was the chance to be a man – and for that , one murder was enough.'(318) He keeps his father's wish , '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).

When Sita gave Hanuman a beautiful pearl necklace , he began to break the pearls with his teeth to find out whether any of the pearls contains his Prabhu Rama. He does not keep a thing devoid of Him. But modern Hanuman(Balram) keeps a strong bottle , Johnnie Walker Black, to murder his master. Modern Rama(Mr. Ashok) is quite different also. When Sita was taken by her mother Earth Rama did not seek other woman's love. But when Pinky Madam returns to America, Mr. Ashok returns to his first love Uma. His family tried to send Balram to jail in the hit-and-run case committed by Pinky Madam.

The myth of Hanuman is effectively used by Adiga in modern day situation. It expresses the changing perspective of master-servant relationship .The myth has got reversed in modern situation. The protagonist Balram explains to Mr. Jiabao , the Premiere of China: "The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop."(173) Like a white tiger , Balram alias Munna breaks the coop.

Adiga's hero breaks the coop and he is the rarest of the human beings and rightly called the white tiger . He adopts all the false means to rise the ladder; the means which are feared by an average Indian due to his feelings of loyalty towards his master. So Lily Want aptly writes, "The novel , one must say , poses a threat to the cultural ethos of India ..."

Adiga deconstructs the myth of Hanuman to suit his purpose .His materials in The white Tiger differs substantially from Valmiki's The Ramayana . These materials are social not mythological . Adiga's portrayal of Mr. Ashok , Pinky Madam and Balram is, in fact , a parody of Rama, Sita and Hanuman respectively. Adiga's Ashok ,Pinky and Balram are modern version of archetypal figures. Influence of James Joyce's Ulysses is clear in this respect. Adiga weaves his plot artistically with the threads of ancient myth and post modern Indian reality.

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