

CLASS AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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Abstract

Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*, which bagged the Man Booker Prize 2008, deals in detail with the issue of being the marginal, the other, the oppressed, and the inferior based on class. As a text mocking the so-called progress of the globalized Indian nation, *The White Tiger* takes up the issues of prevalent poverty, illiteracy, dirty politics, religious conflicts etc. The text under discussion analyses the repercussions of class, being rich or poor, being the master or the servant, and being the have or the have-not in an India that claims to have created an equal, democratic society owing to globalization. This paper seeks to highlight the undercurrents of tension that occur in the lives and minds of the peripheral self as a resultant by-product of the inequalities of class resulting from the contemporary socio-economic scenario of India. Towards the said purpose, this reading of the text shall be done from the postcolonial viewpoint.

Key Words: Class, Oppression, Subalterns, Marginals, Dalit

In 1988, when, the postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak brought forth the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in 2008, Aravind Adiga came up with the answer that the subaltern can not only speak but also roar in the guise of a white tiger. Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*, which bagged the Man Booker Prize 2008, deals in detail with the issue of being the marginal, the other, the oppressed, and the inferior based on class. The text under discussion analyses the repercussions of class, being rich or poor, being the master or the servant, and being the have or the have-not in an India that claims to have created an equal, democratic society owing to globalization. The mainstream views endorse material progress because of globalization of the national economy and presume that it has settled class differences of the past. As a text mocking the so-called progress of the globalized Indian nation, *The White Tiger* takes up the issues of prevalent poverty, illiteracy, dirty politics, religious conflicts etc. in India, to emphasize the inequalities that make up the stinking underbelly of an outwardly shining India. This paper seeks to highlight the undercurrents of tension that occur in the lives and minds of the peripheral self as a resultant by-product of the inequalities of class resulting

from the contemporary socio-economic scenario of India. Towards the said purpose, this reading of the text shall be done from the postcolonial viewpoint.

Throughout the text, Adiga portrays the multi-faced class stratification in India that keeps on changing with time. In rural India, the class stratification is based on caste and the economic status of people whereas in urban India, the stratification is based on education, material success, and the accessibility to political power. Marx views class as a category which is defined by continuing historical processes. In the Indian context, history has continuously subjugated the underclass to the margin so that there remains a felt boundary for them and one that the subaltern is supposed to and expected to maintain at all times, under all conditions, and till eternity. As the Nobel-prize-winning Economist Amartya Sen asserts,

... there is hardly any aspect of our lives that stays quite untouched by our place in the class stratification. Class does not act alone in creating and reinforcing inequality, and yet no other source of inequality is fully independent of class (Sen 207).

Adiga, in the text, puts forward the concepts of the class stratification, class struggle, and the shift of power in class system as well as the change a class undergoes over a period. To put it in his words: "Today, in India, amidst the hoopla and hype of the economic boom, the poor are more invisible than ever before, and the dangers of ignoring them are greater than ever before ..." (Pais np).

Adiga depicts the social, economic, and political structure in contemporary India with stark realities as he creates a *mélange* of two parallel Indias in the text under discussion, the Dark India and the Light India- thus flashing the conflict between and the consciousness among the classes and their members. In his interview with Arthur J Pais, Adiga confesses that the first thing he discovers in India, when he comes to Mumbai, is:

...the servant-master relationship, the class system in India ... and the disparity in income. The rich are so rich. The Indian economy is booming but the money was not really getting down to the poor and the difference in the world between the rich and the poor was phenomenal (Pais np).

Adiga opts for "the half baked" (TWT 11) driver Balram Halwai to narrate this story of inequalities who is "a rare creature" (TWT 35) and whose life moves on "the fourth gear" (TWT 56). He is the "working class hero," (TWT 233) "who sees the tomorrow" (TWT 319). While using the epistolary form, where Balram writes a series of letters to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao depicting his success in migrating from one class to the other, Adiga evidently portrays the tentacles of class as it occurs in contemporary India. Through his letters to Wen Jiabao, Balram unfolds the darkness of the glittering new India. He uses the discourse of the subaltern to underline a sense of alienation, loneliness, and subordination prevalent among those marginalized in the scheme of the nation. The text delineates the humiliation the subaltern experiences in his interactions with the privileged class that ultimately makes him a "philosopher, entrepreneur and a murderer" (TWT 319). The

transformation of a rooster into a white tiger becomes the central theme of the text. Adiga adopts the protagonist Balram as the voice of the underclass, only to change his (Balram's) class mid-course and underlines the deep-rootedness of each class and its traits.

With Balram, the story shifts from the darkness to the light, from the village to the city, and in doing so, Adiga brings to the forefront the constant sufferings and exploitations of the servants that does not change with the changing times. The colonizing attitude of the masters towards the servants is highlighted in the text to bring home the facets of differences amongst classes. While the urban India, 'the light,' as Adiga names it, thrives on the glory of a capitalist, material prosperity, the oppressed class remains colonized by the elites of contemporary India. In the village, there are the landlords who keep the oppressed in their place for centuries together; in the city, the English speaking elites replace them. The servants who are colonized by the English speaking elites of the globalized India show a small glimpse of their resistance to the disparities caused by class. As Bhaba asserts in his Foreword to Fanon's *Black Skin: White Masks*, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition":

It is true for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. it is always in relation to the place of the other that colonial desire is articulated; that is, in part, the fantasmatic space of 'possession' that no one subject can singly occupy which permits the dream of the inversion of roles (Bhaba XXVIII).

Ironically, crippled by his lack of status, Balram though condemns his marginality, but he would also like to migrate to the other side at the first possible opportunity.

Through the portrayal of rural as well as urban India, the text identifies class conflict and the antagonisms that exist in the society due to the conflicting interests arising from different socioeconomic positions and dispositions. As Balram would tell us, "... the history of the world is the history of ten-thousand-year war of brains between the rich and the poor" (TWT 254). This inequality, and the struggle for and exploitation of power are evident through the characterization of "the Stork," "the Raven," "the Buffalo," "the Wild boar," "the Mongoose," "the Great Socialist," (TWT 24-25, 35) and of course through the protagonist Balram. The text rests on the tension resulting from the constant struggle between the privileged class and the underclass. The kidnapping of the son of the Buffalo by the Naxals, to avenge class disparities, ultimately brings forth an even more barbaric act by Buffalo, the landlord, as he brutally murders the entire family of a servant who he believes acted as an aide to the Naxals. This incident aptly reinforces the startling class conflict prevalent in contemporary Indian society. The servant class, too, take their own sweet revenges on the privileged class by occasionally, "peeing in the potted plants, kicking the pet dogs, etc" (TWT 254). The resentment of the poor towards the rich also echoes in these lines in the text as one of them says, "I just love to see a rich man roughed up. It's better than an erection" (TWT 271). The subaltern believes that the affluent have tricked her/him into subalternity by

creating role models from history and religion to ensure the continuity of their pejorative status. The pejorative self, thus, looks at such models with both suspicion and derision and intends to be in a position wherefrom they can reject such options forced upon them by the powerful. Balram, as the voice of the oppressed class, believes that it is a trick played upon them by the exploiters and hence would reinforce his understanding of the issue thus,

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 (TWT 19).

The torture and exploitation of the servants by the masters occurs repeatedly in the text. The Stork and his son Mukesh, whom Balram calls Mongoose, are the perfect symbols of bourgeoisie who consider it their right to exploit the servant. Representative of the exploiter's mindscape, the Stork comments that "Catch'em young, and you can keep'em for life" (TWT 66). The sense of luxury of a rich man in the contemporary, globalized India is associated with the exploitation of servants and the services one can thus avail from them. As Ashok tells his wife Pinky, "Where in New York will you find someone bring you tea and sweet biscuits while you're still lying in bed, the way Ram Bahadur does for us" (TWT 89). The parodic statement of Balram again strengthens this view when he gives an account of the contrasting lifestyles in India and the West to the Chinese Premier when he tells that in India, "the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants" (TWT 68). For the bourgeoisie, a servant is not a human being but a tool for exploitation and entertainment. Ashok uses Balram as a puppet for entertainment when he makes Balram wear a Maharaja tunic on his wife Pinky's birthday, just to make her laugh. Both in the glittering new India and as in the Dark India, service by the working class has always been a thankless job. By negating the importance of the services rendered to them, the privileged class denies the servants dignity in their jobs and thus continues the cycle of exploitation and subjugation.

The humiliation of Balram reaches its peak when he is trapped in a car accident case where he has to falsely admit to have committed a crime his master has in order to help them escape lawful punishment. Balram thus becomes a victim of the crimes committed by the powerful. Here the masters become the representatives of the Government who believe in "employing tactics rather than laws, and even of using laws themselves as tactics-to arrange things in such a way that, through a certain number of means, such and such ends may be achieved" (Foucault 87). Balram confesses as per his masters' order that he has committed the crime with his "*own free will and intention* (TWT 168 emphasis mine). Balram symbolizes the numerous poor drivers of New India who keep on being scapegoats for their masters' erratic social behavior and the incident highlights the 'use and throw' policy of the exploiters. The subaltern is, systematically and repeatedly, trapped by the exploiter and is

powerless in the so-called modern, equal society where he can take no affirmative action to stop being oppressed repeatedly.

Even those, who claim to be the messiahs of the poor and the downtrodden are no less exploiters themselves as is evident in case of the Great Socialist, who is supposedly the voice of the poor, but does not have any sympathy for the subaltern as he makes a profitable deal with the landlords for his personal benefit. But the subaltern, without too many options, would opt for one who can at least pretend to keep the elite on tenterhooks. Balram realizes the manipulative side of the Great Socialist who is capable of humiliating the masters so that the slaves keep on voting him back in. The working class people are cheated by the manipulative politicians but they ignore it because of their undying hope for freedom and independence from the privileged class. Marx would see it as, “[T]he oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them (Marx np). While there always has been a systematic structure of exploitation prevalent in India, in the form of caste, gender or such like, in the contemporary scenario, more than anything else, it has been class. Balram would like to educate the reader, “ ... [I]n the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies” (TWT 64).

Aside from using the size of ‘Bellies’ to symbolize class, Adiga again creates a powerful metaphor in the form of the rooster coop to represent the oppressed and working class of contemporary India. Balram talks about the rooster coop because he believes to have made the transition from the rooster coop to the league of tigers i.e., from the underprivileged to the privileged class. He would tell one:

Go to Old Delhi [...] and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market [...] 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 (TWT 172).

Though the roosters realize about their own exploitation and recognize their exploiter, they have no power to come out of the vicious circle. Through the voice of Balram, Adiga asserts, “It’s because 99.9 percent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market” (TWT 175). The exploited, having accepted their exploitation by the elite as a reality of life, therefore keep on compromising with their state. Deprived of the bare minimum necessities in life and without any means to gain a more fulfilling life experience, the exploited thus *choose* to continue in their marginal positions (emphasis mine). In an interview with *The Independent* Adiga enounces:

It is, like, basically you follow your dharma or code of life because who you are depends on the economic well-being of your family and the name your family has. You cannot take the money and run because that will put your entire family in peril or in disgrace. The Rooster Coop does not raise its voice

or break the code because they know if they rebel then their families will be destroyed-hunted, beaten and burned alive by the masters (Adiga np).

Adiga, very adeptly creates a host of symbols in the text that metaphorically refer to the crosscurrents of class and its repercussions in the contemporary India. Adiga, wittily, uses the cars as symbols and by showing the difference between a Maruti Suzuki and a Honda city, depicts the difference between classes. As Balram would opine:

Maruti is a small, simple fellow, a perfect servant to the driver; the moment you turn the ignition key, he does exactly what the driver wants him to. The Honda City is a larger car, a more sophisticated creature, with a mind of his own: he has power steering, and an advanced engine, and does what he wants to do (TWT 62).

Balram rechristens his master's Black Honda City 'a black egg' which works as a shield for the rich against the working class. Balram is aware of his class and can sense the existence of "two separate cities" (TWT 116) inside and outside the dark egg. He can identify himself with the outside city. Adiga shows that the class structure in society that wants a person to stick to its own class and caste is a system to keep away a section of people from opportunities to better their lives.

As it is evident, Balram becomes a witness to the class disparity that is on full display in the office of a national level political party in the capital of the glittering India. The guards at the office gate do not allow some poor farmers to enter the office; however, a TV van, a symbol of the consumerist media that ironically feeds itself on the myth of being the champion of the poor and the oppressed, is allowed instantly to get inside. It demonstrates the bourgeois attitude of today's politicians who are more concerned about their own material gains and give priority to their own endorsement rather than being concerned about the predicament of the poor. It also reinforces the pejorative's inherent inferiority for their own kind. The deprivation and suppression of the poor in the hands of one of their own is evident again when Balram witnesses a scene where a poor person is deprived of entering a mall in the capital of India by the guard on the entrance. It is in fact ironical that the security guard who also is from the underclass waits at the door of the mall, a symbol of the material prosperity of the rich, and does not allow the subaltern from his own fraternity to enter the mall. "But everyone who was allowed into the mall had shoes on their feet" (TWT 148) is what becomes a reference point for the guard. It shows not only the capitalist behavior of the globalized India, but also underlines how the exploited is cleverly kept at his place so that in this neo-colonial atmosphere, the exploitation of the pejorative class remains a continuation of past colonial practices. The subaltern, here, is not only restricted from entering the space of the exploiter but is also made to live by the rules formed by the latter. Balram challenges this situation by buying a white T-shirt and black shoes like his master Ashok. The next day he visits the mall in his new attire and much to his surprise, he is allowed into the mall. Adiga depicts the class distinction that takes place between people within the circle though they

belong to the same pejorative class. The drivers also assume their class and status according to the vehicle they drive. Adiga is simultaneously humourous and sarcastic when he writes:

Until this evening, his status in the driver's circle had been low: his master drove only a Maruti- Suzuki Zen, a small car. Today he was being as bossy as he wanted. The drivers were passing his mobile from hand to hand and gazing at it like monkeys gaze at something shiny they have picked up (TWT 153).

In *The White Tiger*, the configurations of class, status and position change with the shifting of power and position of the characters. In the text, the changeover of Vijay inspires Balram to transform to a *man* from an *animal* (emphasis mine). From a pig herd's son to a bus conductor and then a politician, Vijay climbs the class ladder fast as his class also changes according to his changing status. He becomes the catalyst for Balram's transformation. Whereas Vijay starts as a deputy to the stork in his political career with his sharp rise in the party, the class distinction, and the exploiter-exploited relationship of Laxmangarh undergoes a dramatic change in New Delhi when Vijay becomes an influential politician. Now, Ashok, the younger son of the Stork, has to act subservient to an erstwhile pejorative person. In Laxmangarh the Stork is representative of the privileged class; but for the Great Socialist who is the powerful one in the political establishment, the Stork becomes "some little village landlord" (TWT 104). Again, the Mongoose is displaced from his position of power when the Great Socialist makes him hold the spittoon and then spits into it three times. It is apt to quote critic Nandana Dutta's observation in this context: "in society the viewer-viewed structure remains—always someone looking and someone looked at—even if the occupant of these positions exchange places" (Dutta 78).

The fight for some status of the marginals amongst themselves has also been illustrated in the novel. In Dhanbad, the Nepali security guard in the Stork's house loves to show his superiority over other servants. He enjoys to be treated with respect by them. Balram comments: "(Servants, incidentally, are obsessed with being called 'sir' by other servants ...)" (TWT 106). The guard in a five-star hotel also abuses Balram. The guard feels himself to be very important because the American tourists staying in that hotel want to be photographed with him. With his roots in the Dark India, the guard is unable to comprehend the 'gaze' of the mainstream that would like to keep him trapped forever in a photograph, always smiling and always distant. Whenever he sees any driver near the hotel, the guard glares and shakes his authoritative finger because that, he believes, differentiates him from the others in the periphery. From the driver's perspective, Balram sighs, "That's the driver's fate. Every other servant thinks he can boss over us" (TWT 200). That caste is still a marker as far as social class is concerned comes to the forefront, when Balram goes to learn driving and the old trainer reproaches him for being a 'halwai or 'a sweet maker.' He apprehends, "You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs-they're fighters, they can become drivers. You think sweet-makers can last long in fourth gear?" (TWT 56).

The power game in the class hierarchy persists where only the faces change but the exploitation remains the same. It is interesting to note here that gradually Balram too falls into the same trap. After killing his master, Balram adopts his dead master's name and becomes Ashok Sharma to start a new life as an entrepreneur in the city of Bangalore. In rechristening himself as Ashok Sharma, Balram achieves a sense of the subjugated self as a renewed, upgraded, postcolonial 'changing self,' thus making an attempt to overcome the predicament of being the lesser self that has to stay within the confirmed frames constructed by the rich. Interestingly, by assuming his dead master's name, Balram takes it unto himself to carry on the legacy of exploitation and oppression. From being a mere servant, in Bangalore Balram becomes the man "people call when they have a crisis!" (TWT 38). Years later, Balram gets involved in a cab accident where his driver Asif runs over "a man on a bicycle" (TWT 309). Balram bribes the police and the police do not file any complaint against him. It is only because now Balram has elevated his class and the boy who died was on a bicycle and not on a motorbike or in a car, and thus one from the periphery, that Balram escapes punishment by law. Though Balram gives monetary compensation to the dead boy's parents, his crime remains the same and his position changes from the subaltern to the exploiter, and his migration from the margin to the centre is completed. Now, he complains about things "the way the rich complain; not the way the poor complain" (TWT 310).

As a driver, Balram always follows his master Ashok. In the context of the master-servant relationship too, Balram blames his master Ashok for his crime. He reasons out: "He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him- and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent?" (TWT 197). His mimicry and copying of his master in all regards, starting from his dressing sense to his manipulations for material gains, makes him one of the postcolonial 'mimic men' who not only mimic their authority to 'participate in the imperialistic regime' but also transgress from their own peripheral selves to become the neo-imperialist" (Kochhar-Lindgren 297). (Being a part of the ex-colonized India, Balram resembles the "Black Skin" who, as Fanon would say, wears the "White Mask" (Fanon xxxiii). He starts the business of outsourcing which Ashok always wanted to do. By adopting his erstwhile master's name and getting into a business his master would have got into, Balram becomes the replica of Ashok, the master. While Ashok, the Indian with a colonial hangover, prefers a blonde rather than an Indian prostitute, Balram too, imitates his master by trying to make out with a white-skinned prostitute. As Viviligo-Lips would tell Balram:

Look here, the rich of Delhi have had all the golden-haired women they want; who knows what they'll want next? ... Now it's going to be the working class that lines up for the white women (TWT 232).

Whereas Ashok gets a blonde to himself, Balram is *cheated* with a girl who has only had a 'dye job' (emphasis mine). Balram sighs: "how the rich *always* get the best things in life and all that we get is their leftovers" (TWT 233 emphasis original). Balram fails to escape from

“the feeling of inferiority” (Fanon 80) associated with his class. Hence, though he mimics his master all the while, Balram remains “an imperfect double” (Sharpe 143) of Ashok .

As Balram becomes one of the bourgeoisies, his philosophy of life undergoes a change too. Balram starts out as a subaltern who is exploited by the privileged but by killing his erstwhile master and then taking up the dead master’s name as his own, Balram becomes one of the exploiters, thus completing the transformation and migration from one class to another. The author seems to suggest that class and its machinations go deeper than assumed and drive the subaltern, more than the privileged, to a self-destructive tinge. The erstwhile “working-class hero” (TWT 233) now inherits the corruption of the bourgeoisie and wants to segregate people thus, “Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans. That’s my whole philosophy in a sentence” (TWT 276). In the process, Balram changes sides from the periphery to the centre, thus effectuating the impact of the powerful on the subaltern and subjugating the subaltern self to the forces of mimicry. As Homi Bhaba opines in the essay “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse”: “... from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects, mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhaba 126).

Adiga powerfully evidences the existence of colonial subalternity and marginality that continues even after sixty years of “flag independence” (Boehmer 8) in India. The repercussions of class through stratification, conflict, and consciousness, thus dominate the theme of the text. Through the protagonist Balram, Adiga creates a voice of the subaltern who justifies his betrayal and treachery for it comes with the satisfactory realisation that, “...it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a *minute*, what it means not to be a servant” (TWT 321 emphasis original). With much brilliance and subtlety, the writer delineates the repercussions of class in both the Dark India as well as the Light India. While this depiction of the contemporary India startles the reader, through the portrayal of the classes and the forces behind those, Adiga underlines the subaltern’s struggle for survival in the landscape of contemporary India and proves that though it is always the survival of the fittest, the fitness as such keeps changing according to situations. Thus, *The White Tiger*, undoubtedly, displays the repercussions of the class in contemporary India in all its hues and shades.

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