

The White Tiger: An Age-old Agony and Anguish of the Subalterns

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ABSTRACT

Adiga has attempted to expose the age old agony and anguish of the subalterns and oppressed. Adiga tells a story of the underclass and its life: begging for food, sleeping under concrete flyovers, defecating on the roadside, shivering in the cold, and struggling in twenty first century, for its freedom. Balaram, the protagonist of the novel becomes a witness to the glitz as well as the unjust system around him and begins to question his position as a servant, his place in society. He desires for better life. He begins desiring the basic things of life which have so far been denied to him by circumstances, the system and his own passive acceptance of his condition. He is aware of the limitation of the given social structure and rebels.

KEYWORDS

Social Structure; Freedom; Subaltern.

Postcolonial writing exposes the problems of everyday life and unmasks the fundamental aspects of the socio-economic reality prevalent in the society. It describes socio-economic inequality, injustice and neglect. This plight of the poor has remained in focus in the writings of several Indian English writers in general and the novelists in particular. They comment on the ever-widening rich-poor division, which has gripped postcolonial India. Their writing suggests that for the advancement and growth of the country, the ever-increasing socio-economic inequality has to be bridged because the educated population of youth belonging to the marginalized sections is increasing. Their helplessness and vulnerability is obvious, either from their reticent suppression or from intrepid rebellion. They have a right to enhance their social status and in order to achieve this they are in a position to

follow the path of virtue or to leave the traditional moral values. In the postcolonial literature subaltern occupies prominent place. People in terms of class, caste, age, gender are treated as subalterns. The lack and deprivation, loneliness and alienation, subjugation and subordination, the resignation and silence, the resilience and neglect mark the lives of subaltern, even when they resist and rise up, they feel bounded and defeated by their subject positions. They have no spokesperson in the society they live in and so helplessly suffer. Gayatri Spivak in her work "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1985) has used the term 'subaltern'. In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. The subalterns can never express their own reasoning, forms of knowledge or logic, they must instead form their knowledge to Western ways of

knowing. Subaltern groups create social movement to contest and disassemble Western claims to power. These groups use local knowledge and struggle to create new spaces of opposition and alternative future. Spivak comments that if the subalterns have no history in the context of colonial production, the subaltern as female is even more in shadow. Spivak raises a question whether postcolonial studies can help to give a voice to suppressed people. She argues that the construction of the subaltern group by other groups essentialised the people who are silenced by the elite. They could never escape using the language which itself constructed them as secondary, subordinate. Spivak's writing demonstrates the experience of social and political oppression in postcolonial societies such as India. According to Spivak, subaltern is the counterpart of the society whose voice and the activities and other expression of power had been muted, whose vice had been snatched away and whose indomitable force had been lost or swept away because in respect of the power of voice, representation and above all the question of identity play a vital part in their survival.

Adiga has attempted to expose the age-old agony and anguish of the subalterns and oppressed. He, in *The White Tiger* (2008), writes about the nature of underclass, its identity, and causes of its emergence, ways of its subjugation, articulation and reaction against it. Adiga tells a story of this underclass and its hand to mouth existence: begging for food, sleeping in the open, defecating on the roadside, enduring the ravages of the weather, and struggling in the twenty first century, for its freedom.

The novel describes a darkly humorous perspective of India's struggle in a globalised world. The novel also gives the detailed accounts of the Indian society i.e. rural as well as urban. The places like Laxmangarh, Gaya, Dhanabad, Delhi and

Bangalore in the novel represent the Indian society in villages, cities and metropolitan cities. Besides this, Adiga portrays the realistic picture of human life and the problems of being poor as well as rich.

Adiga penetrates into almost all fields of society in the novel to present the scenario of India in the postcolonial era. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstition, dowry practice, economic disparity, zamindari system, exploitation of marginal farmers and landless laborers, rise of Naxalism, corrupt education system, poor health services, tax evading racket, master-servant relationship, prostitution, entrepreneurial success, underclass people's life, social taboos, corrupt political system, police and judicial working etc. are the issues discussed in the novel. Adiga in the novel has attempted to bring into light the dark areas of India and how misery, humiliation, exploitation, torture; diseases of the marginalized society have tightened the life of subalterns.

The novel describes how most of the people though poor enjoy their ceremonies, copy their master's lifestyle and find satisfaction in whatever they get. In an interview, Adiga talks about how he got inspiration for Balram Halwai and captured his voice. Balram Halwai is a composite of various men he has met when traveling through India. Adiga spends a lot of time loitering about train stations, bus stands, servant quarters and slums. He listens and talks to the people around him. According to Adiga, there is a kind of continuous murmur of growl beneath middleclass life in India and this noise never gets recorded. Balram is the voice of all such people.

Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel narrates his story through letters which he writes in seven consecutive

nights addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, which are never actually sent. Wen is visiting India to learn why it is so good at producing entrepreneurs in India. So Balram presumes to tell him how to win power and influence people in the modern India. Balram is sure that the yellow and the brown men will take over the world from the white man because the white man has become effective through toleration of homosexuality, too slim and physically weakened by over exposure to mobile phones. Balram Halwai belongs to the fictive village Laxmangarh, which is in Gaya. Gaya is famous for the national history because some people say Buddha got his enlightenment here. Like most families in this region his family is very poor and traditional. Balram lives with his grandmother, Kusum, father, Vikram Halwai, elder brother, Kishan, and extended family. Every member of the family works hard for the well-being of their relatives. His mother dies in his early age. His father is a rickshaw puller. He is a hounourable and courageous man; a patient and quite person. He never crouched while waiting for passengers. He always wants Balram to go to school to learn how to read and write so that he can have better possibilities. Balram's family gives him neither a name nor a date of birth. They just call him Munna, meaning boy.

At the school, he is given the name, Balram, by his teacher and the school inspector names him "The White Tiger", the rarest animal in the jungle. He is taken out of school at an early age to help pay off a family debt taken for his cousin sister's dowry. Balram and his elder brother, Kishan move to Dhanbad. They take a job in a tea-shop. His father does not accept that Balram works in the tea-shop. His whole life, he works very hard to nourish his family. He just wants better life for his sons. He dies of his illness- tuberculosis, as he does not get the proper treatment. After

his father's death, Kishan takes care of Balram. Kishan marries one month later. Balram gets his further education by eavesdropping on the conversations of the tea-house guests. Balram is fired because of spying on every customer in the shop.

Balram wants to become a driver to earn more money. Vijay a bus conductor, in his village, is his hero. Vijay has a fashionable uniform and a regular salary. So he gets out of rural poverty and the village. Balram wants to be like him. He approaches an old taxi driver but he rejects to teach Balram driving as he belongs to Halwai caste. After a much insistence, he agrees to teach him and demands three hundred rupees, plus a bonus. He is very strict. He slaps Balram each time he makes mistakes. Nevertheless, he is satisfied with Balram's learning to drive a car. Balram gets a work in Stork's house as he tells that he belongs to Laxmangarh. His new masters Mr. Ashok, the Stork and Mukesh are from Laxmangarhh. The Stork, Thakur Ramdev is a landlord of Laxmangarh and father of Mukesh and Ashok. The Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven are four landlords of Laxmgarh who get their names from the peculiarities of appetite that have been detected in them. The Buffalo is the greediest of all. Those who use the road or run the rickshaw have to pay one third of their earning to the Buffalo to feed him. The Stork owns a river. He takes a cut of every catch of fish caught by fishermen and a toll from boatmen who cross the river. The Wild Boar owns the good agree cultural land around Laxmangarh and takes day wages from the workers. The Raven owns the worst land and takes money from those who graze their flocks there. The Stork has a huge house in Dhanabad where Mr. Ashok and his American wife Pinky Madam live. Balram eavesdrops on the family conversations learning about their lives. Mukesh Sir, Mr. Ashok and Pinky Madam mock him but he does not defend himself against their words and actions.

Balram comes to Delhi with his masters. He describes how Delhi is weird and confusing. He explains how the names and numbers of several streets do not follow any system of logic, which disturbs his driving. While driving around the city to drop Mr. Ashok and his wife, he gets constantly mocked by Mukesh for getting lost all the time but Mr. Ashok immediately protects him as he feels pity for him. Balram waits outside and watches the people going inside and coming out of the mall. Mukesh warns Mr. Ashok to watch on Balram and leaves them. While leaving, he gives lots of warnings to Balram like the air conditioner should be turned off when no one is in the car and at the end of each day, he must give a reading of the meter to make sure he has not been driving the car on his own.

On Pinky Madam's birthday, Mr. Ashok dresses up Balram as maharaja to serve them dinner and drive them to a party. One night both of them get drunk. Pinky Madam forcefully takes charge of car and hits a child. She wants to stop and see but Mr. Ashok refuses to this and drives away. The next morning Mukesh Sir comes back and asks Balram to take the blame for the whole incident. For the first time Balram thinks of going to jail.

Balram observes all these changes in his master. He wants to copy these changes. Once he goes to a prostitute like his master. The prostitute turns out fake and Balram realises that the poor people get worse things. According to him, the subalterns are caught in a rooster coop. Adiga uses this symbol to show that the hens know they are next, yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. The servants never fight against this coop. Poor people are always exploited by their masters. On the day of election one man becomes mad. Vijay and a policeman beat him, hit him with their sticks, and kick him until he dies. Though such poor and marginalized people

are crushed by masters they honestly work for their masters. Balram describes a man who delivers furniture to people's home on a cycle-rickshaw. The owners give him money in cash: ten or five thousands. The amount equals to his year's or two years' salary but he never takes a rupee out of it and hands it over to his boss. Some chauffeurs drive an empty car with a black suitcase full of millions of rupees. He puts it down where his master wants and never touches a rupee. If he takes the money he can start a new life or can complete his dream but he does not do that because "Indians are the world's most honest people" (174). They are caught in the Rooster coop. Masters trust their servants. The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. Adiga writes that in China there is secret police to raid the thieves' house at night and put them in jail or shoot them. In India there is no dictatorship or the secret police but the coop. A servant does not break out the coop because he is trapped and tied in the family. He does not want to see his family destroyed, hunted, beaten and burned alive by the masters. No normal being can do it only a white tiger can do it that's why the marginalized people suffer.

Balram becomes a witness to the glitz as well as the unjust system around him and begins to question his position as a servant, his place in society. In short, he begins desiring the basic things of life which have so far denied to him by circumstances, the system and his own passive acceptance of his condition. He is aware of the limitation of the given social structure and rebels. He kills his master to get what he is longing. He becomes a successful entrepreneur.

Thus, through Balram, Adiga wants to develop a kind of awareness in the conscious of the outcaste and exploited people. Balram is a true representative of a society in transition. Balram becomes a witness to the glitz as well as the unjust system around him and begins to question

his position as a servant, his place in society. He desires for better life. He is first impressed by changes in Vijay's personality as bus conductor, then a politician and at last a businessman. Balram also begins to long for the life his master lives. In short he begins desiring the basic things of life which have been so far denied to him. He is aware of the limitation of the given social structure and rebels. He kills his master to get what he is longing. He becomes a successful entrepreneur. Adiga describes Balram as a rebel. He breaks all established norms of family, moral values, tradition and belief. Adiga has realistically painted two contradictory sides of India i.e. - the nation as dark, corrupt, wasteland, having subalterns and illiterate; on the other hand the nation with lavish lifestyle, luxurious and emerging economy. He has attempted to give voice to the subaltern. He gives hint about the possible violence that may be caused in future by subalterns if they are continuously humiliated, exploited and blackmailed. Balram's story is of revenge, ambition and corruption. He is representative of the poor in India who hope for better future. His being a driver is a new path he gets in which he comes close to the master's lifestyle. He becomes aware of the corruption in the society. His going

with his master to Delhi provides him an opportunity to observe closely the city life. He realizes the difference between dark and bright areas in the city. His realization leads to the crisis in his mind. He observes the growth achieved by bus conductor. He takes the violent decision to become a free person and the desire to be called gentleman is a turning point of the novel. He desires to be the part of the glamorized world. He wants to gain materialistic prosperity. He experiences that all the political, social, official and controlling power are under the control of money. Therefore, for him money becomes a target point. He plans to get himself out of the trap of marginalized territorial condition, and ultimately decides to become a rich person. Balram's act to murder his master and become a businessman is unacceptable in civilized society. But his action is the outburst of a long suffering silence. It is due to disgust with slavery, bondage and rootlessness. He never feels guilty for his action. His change in his status from a rustic, marginalized, subaltern and an oppressed to a successful businessman, a rich entrepreneur and an elite part of civilized society indicates the rise of marginalized people.

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