

An Itinerary of a Subaltern in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga

M. Sheeba

Ph.D (English) Research Scholar, Ph.D.(Part-time),
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu, India.

ABSTRACT

The White Tiger, a fable of aggression is the winner of the 40th Man Booker Prize in 2008. The paper emphasizes the purpose behind the negative depiction of India in the novel. It enlists the major theme and sub themes. The main theme is the contrast between the stark reality of interior India and the brilliant image of exterior India. The paper attacks corruption in government, educational sectors and medical fields. John McLeod's theory of post colonialism is applied to distinguish place and space while dealing with subalterns. Homi Bhabha's theory of displacement is applied to the isolation of subalterns. The injustice meted out to Balram, the male protagonist turns him into a criminal. He becomes an entrepreneur through unjust means. The novelist chooses two developing countries, India and China to depict the fast changing world. There is some discussion on Hinduism as well. The paper ends with the narrative techniques and vision of the future.

KEYWORDS

Subalterns; Marginalization; Post-colonialism; Epistolary form.

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger* won 40th Man Booker Prize in 2008 in the same year when it was published. He is the fourth Indian born author to win the prize, after Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai. V. S. Naipaul is another Booker Prize Winner who is of Indian Origin but is not an Indian citizen. The other authors shortlisted for Booker Prize are Amitav Ghosh and Steve Toltz. The novel studies the contrast between the inner true India and outer developing economy.

The novel *The White Tiger*, a fable of aggression, highlights the influence of the aristocrats and bureaucrats. Aravind Adiga attacks the discrimination between the rich and the poor existing in society.

There is no end in India, Mr. Jiabao, as Mr. Ashok so correctly used to

say. You'll have to keep paying the fuckers. But I complain about the people the way the rich complain; not the way the poor complain. The difference is everything (Adiga 310).

The novelist attacks the injustice existing in society with the aim of bringing transformation just like Charles Dickens, Flaubert, Friedrich Engel and Balzac aimed. Self-examination of India and not the wrong projection of under-privileged take place in the process of portrayal of the character Balram, the anti-hero from crushingly poor strata of society.

The main theme of the novel is the contrast between the stark reality of the interior India and the brilliant image of exterior India as a rising global economy in the modern world. There are many other

sub-themes such as corruption existing among politicians and in political system, rich and poor discrimination, poverty, aggression, depression, family loyalty and independence of the individuals, the lifestyle of the people who returned after a stay in America, changes in Indian culture, brutal struggle for power and loopholes in the Indian legal system. The novel was written when India was undergoing many dramatic changes as far as economy was concerned. There was IT boom.

Aravind Adiga highlights the India of light and India of darkness. 'India of Light' represents the illumined life of influential people of India and 'India of Darkness' represents the downtrodden and the underprivileged people and their plight. He chooses a subaltern to project the scenario of India. Even now the villagers suffer from the existence of mafia. The novel describes the rich landlords who misuse their influence and turn out to be mafias. It compares them to animals, the Buffalo, the Stork, Wild Boar, and Raven befitting their negative attitudes. Everyone in the village becomes the slaves of mafia. They will be under their constant threat. They blackmail the innocent villagers for money. Even for using the public roads, they will have to pay money. They stop the villagers even from using the basic necessity, water, the primary source of their livelihood. The poor becomes poorer and the rich becomes richer has become the order of the day. Even though free education is given by the government, it is not reaching the people. Many people in government offices embezzle the fund allotted for education. Some people work without conscience and many people try to follow them and so the corruption continues. The poor turn out to be the victims. Many intelligent children have to give up their education to earn livelihood. They become bread winners at a tender age. Even though they have desire to learn, they

cannot afford. The marriage in the family victimizes the young boys in the family. The wedding expenditure consumes more money and so the elders in the family compel them to go as child labour. The children give up their dreams of tertiary education and long for a rich life. Sometimes their lives end up without their dreams being realised.

John McLeod's seminal work on post-colonial London will serve as a major reference here. He asserts that "stories engage with the determinations of both places and spaces and carry out 'a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces...' (9). The protagonist Balram longs for establishing his identity. He is desirous of a rich life with good education but he spends his life in squalor. He was nicknamed 'white tiger' in school since he was good at learning and he had an ambitious spirit which was a rarity there. But he had to give up his education to work as a driver for the aristocrats. Though he accepts his position as his fate, there is ever burning craving in his heart which drives him restless. Neither the government nor the society helps the poor. The individual has to be self-made. The burning desire should help the helpless poor. Sometimes they come up honestly or mostly they accept their poverty as their destiny.

Balram strives for socio-economic liberation of the marginalized. He possessed determination and perseverance which is the quality of the subaltern subject. The status of Balram is redefined as emancipatory reversal of "the disjunctive, fragmented and displaced agency of those who have suffered the sentence of history" (Bhabha 56). Adiga attacks the vicious circle of capitalism through the precarious hero, Balram. The novel experiments a new genre variant. Adiga writes a "condition-of-India novel" (Moseley 154). The condition of India and the framework of the entrepreneurial career remain same when class hegemony,

class emancipation, revolt, crime and guilt are concerned. These are the platforms needed for the subaltern's inauguration into light from darkness. But the poor people in India are not ignorant of the rich class and their attitude. When they go as call drivers or drivers to the rich, they are exposed to the day to day life of the rich. The poor take the rich to malls, corporate, and to the places where bureaucrats live. The city is a revelation for Balram. He calls the developed places in India as the land of the Light and slum as the land of Darkness. Whenever he sees the pomp and splendour of city and the rich, he will feel depressed to realise that he will never get access to the aristocratic world. Every poor person learns only from the streets especially from what they see and listen. That is their real education. They cannot tolerate the injustice and political mechanisations which happen in their very presence. But theirs is the voice of the voiceless. The rich family does the business and they grease the palms of the politicians. Even though the poor people do the hero worship of their masters, unjust plans are executed. Balram had to accept the blame of the murder of a child but it was actually done by Pinky madam when she did drunken driving. The novelist through the character Balram urges the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, to pay attention to the stark reality of the present democracy of India before visiting India. He carries in his mind an 'Imagined India'. Flourishing economy, complete literacy and reduction in people Below Poverty Line are simply misleading. The picture of Gandhi and the practice of corruption under his very image is an ironic status of India.

Adiga explores the educational back up of the subaltern thus:

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and

you'll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half hour before falling asleep—all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (Adiga 10)

As Bhabha says, "subaltern social groups, nonetheless, also are in a position to subvert the authority of the social groups who hold hegemonic power", Balram fights against autocratic influence of the bureaucrats and aristocrats. The subaltern, Balram commits homicide at last to climb the ladder of success in society. The protagonist overhears the plot of his master. He broods over his plight. He likes to go a few steps ahead of his master. He utilises the opportunity to murder his master, escapes with seven lakh rupees and flees to Bangalore with his cousin Dharam. The only one skill he knows is driving. He wants to become big by expanding his skills into entrepreneurial skill of hiring the drivers and start a taxi company to drop the employees who work in odd hours safely. He studies the necessity of Bangalore and it has sown the seed of

starting a taxi company. Finally he realises his dream of becoming a multi-millionaire.

He now owns a taxi fleet that services the anti-social working hours of the growing city's relocated call centres, whose First World cost-cutter owners provide the financial umbrella-shade in which budding entrepreneur like Balram may shelter and prosper. Thus he eases himself a rung or two up the social and economic ladder. If only the elevation might have happened without treading on others.... (Dubey 154).

The injustice meted out to him made him the murderer and entrepreneur. The loopholes in the law helped him. Balram suffers due to the drawbacks of a rapidly developing country. The young aspire for western prosperity but the government institutions are governed by Communist style of greed and corruption. Balram represents rebellion of an individual and evolution of the poor society but he selects a short-cut to prosperity just like the no-conscience politicians and businessmen. The white tiger becomes a black panther in seeking salvation. The poor people till now seek right salvation from their miserable state. The betterment of the downtrodden through state legislation and Cultural Revolution is still an unsolved mystery. The rural India suffers and rises due to familial bonding. Balram indeed succeeded in his plans but the poor people are helpless unless they are self-made. But it is not necessary to take to anti social practice.

Mere survival itself becomes difficult for the oppressed and they cannot think of becoming prosperous. The Rooster Coop syndrome is very well portrayed in the novel. The chicks fight to get air for breathing and space to stand and their entire fight is for a little space and air. Just like them, the poor suffer for day-to-day food. When mere survival becomes

a tough task, they cannot dream of prosperity. Taking a fictional village in Bihar called Lakshmangarh, Adiga projects a real village scenario of India. This illusory village is not related to the real village, Lakshmangarh in Rajasthan. There are many villagers who do not know even to name their children. They call by the terms, *Munna* or *Munni* which mean a boy or a girl. The caste system is also attacked by the addition of the second name Halwai which means a sweet-maker.

In India, the aspect of being 'subaltern' is prominent among women, dalits, rural, tribal and immigrant labourers. The rural folk, the dalit, and illiterate women are the most oppressed. Here Balram is not mentioned as Dalit but his plight remains same. The servants are honest or they are threatened to be honest. "The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (Adiga 175). The honesty of the subaltern is altered by their masters and their cunning strategies. Even though the servants know that no one else will help him to become better citizens, they do not rebel but simply succumb as is described in the novel thus:

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages... 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. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (Adiga 173-174)

Balram takes law into his hands. The subaltern-self fights to establish 'his' self and his 'space' for his people. The Rooster Coop symbolises the subalterns' socio-local entrapment. The subaltern

Balram changes from 'subaltern as victim' to 'subaltern as victimizer'.

The novel introduces India to the Chinese. Balram points out the difference between India and China, both are developing economies of the world. India abounds in self-made entrepreneurs as said by Adiga thus:

Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, *does* have entrepreneurs. Thousands and thousands of them. Especially in the field of technology. And these entrepreneurs—we entrepreneurs—have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now. (Adiga 4)

There is some discussion of Hinduism in *The White Tiger*. The idols of Hindu Gods and Goddesses are mentioned. The poor people struggle for their survival and the upper classes do have some belief in religion. Balram satirizes the existence of innumerable Gods of Hinduism. He quotes them as three crore and sixty lakh Gods. Mr. Ashok's father opposed to his marriage with Pinky Madam as she belongs to a different religion. The impersonation of Mohammed Asif to be Ram Persad and Balram's main role in driving him away show that there is not so much love for Muslims in India. Balram regrets his action at a later stage confirms that secularism is

still practised in India. There are references to four great Muslim poets in the novel. They are Rumi, Iqbal and Mirza Ghalib.

The novel carries both version of the present India to a great extent and it foresees India in future to some extent. The caste system slowly disintegrates in India giving place to rich and poor discrimination. The novel points out the transformation of a protagonist into an anti-hero. His is a rags-to-riches story. He rises from an honest poor driver to a rich businessman. Balram who represents a confident Indian foresees India and China to be super power in the global arena. India and China with their massive population working for the technology industry, they will emerge as a super power which will rule the world. "...In twenty years' time, it will just be us brown and yellow men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the whole world." (Adiga 305). Though Balram finds out the similarities between the two countries, he says that brown men first and yellow men next to rule the whole world which shows his inner drive to lead the nations of the world.

The novel follows epistolary style and the entire novel is drafted as a written correspondence through email from a well-established entrepreneur to His Excellency Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Mr. Premier when he evinces interest to visit India. It should not be misunderstood as a negative projection of India but should be realised as a clarion call for grabbing the attention of the government to improve the standard of living.

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