

## **Quest for Identity: A Study of Self-Animalisation in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger***

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper will look at the technique of animalisation in Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008), where the animal, the white tiger, is not just a tiger in a cage but a trope for the 'tiger-ness' of the 'ever-so-ready to pounce' attitude of the young Indian. The novel shows the predicament of the Indian youth belonging to the lower strata of society who find themselves trapped just like a tiger in his cage. As will be shown, the white tiger in Adiga's novel has been variously used to symbolize the ideas of individuality, freedom, aggression, survival and hypermasculinity. Through the discourse of animality, this paper will contend that for the protagonist, Balram, animalising or bestializing himself as a white tiger becomes an important meaning-making exercise to profess his identity and come to terms with his immediate exploitative reality, especially in the context of the rising class conflict and deteriorating socio-economic conditions in the Indian scenario. The novel is replete with instances of animalisation and bestialisation. This paper attempts to find out why does Balram bestialise himself as the white tiger and how does such an exercise help him? It is an undertaking in the field of cultural anthropology and it will border the theoretical concepts of the area of Human-animal studies.

### **KEYWORDS**

Animality; Animalisation; Animal Imagery; Animal Metaphor; Animal Symbolism; Self and Identity.

### **I. Introduction: Everywhere, Animals Exist**

Animals have served as important symbols for humans throughout history to help them understand the world and themselves. Hence, they have always been part of our symbolic order. They represent our behaviours, concepts and desires, an exercise almost impossible to be traced historically. The civilization's penchant for animals is as old as the first humans to walk on earth as suggested by the cave

paintings. To be noted, the Holy Bible portrays Adam gaining dominance over the animals by the very act of naming them. The act of naming and classifying animals has therefore been a continuous process; be it Aristotle's system of classification in *History of Animals* or Carl Linnaeus' anatomical observation in *System Naturae* (1758) or Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in *The Origin of Species* (1859). Today, animals are being genetically manipulated and mutated to form new

species that nowhere resemble their former selves. For instance, the first-ever animal to be patented was a mouse genetically engineered; specially made to develop cancer for screening tests in 1988 after the grant was approved by the United States Patent and Trademark Office for researchers at Harvard University (Singer 156). Another such instance includes the cloning of a sheep named Dolly in 1997 (Sax xix). Even the turkeys that one buys nowadays for Christmas or Thanksgiving have such huge breasts that they cannot naturally mate by reaching one another but must be artificially inseminated for reproduction. The same is the case with cows in dairy farming. These examples illustrate how the boundary between beings that are produced naturally and the ones that are manufactured has been dismantled. It is important to note in this respect that the very category 'animal' has been politically driven since it has tended to put some (humans) at a significant advantage over others (all the rest of the animals). The discriminatory basis of classificatory systems is very well mirrored in Jorge Luis Borges' categorisation of animals in his *Other Inquisitions* (1964), also quoted by Michel Foucault in the preface to his *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (2002):

[In] a certain Chinese encyclopaedia entitled the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* . . . it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f ) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower

vase, (n) those that resemble flies at a distance. (Foucault xvi)

Keeping this in view, identifying animals in strictly biological terms would be too limiting and restrictive since animals, together with their material and symbolic value, have become an integral part of our social order. To look at an animal is to look at a tradition where we not only talk about their domestication, genetic makeup, preservation, and physical characteristics but also our intimate relationship with them as reflected in myths, legends, and literature. In his *The Mythical Zoo* (2001), Boria Sax classifies animals as those that are "Metamorphosed", "Divine", "Demonic", "Satiric", "Political" and "Diabolic" to show how animals have been preserved as traditions: "Tradition links animals to the ideas, practices, and events that make up human culture" (xi). Animals therefore mean many things but most of all, their treatment is a direct reflection of our values and customs. In this sense, they are not just passive objects or beings that exist in our literature and culture but are invaluable stand-ins to convey important ideas and concepts that constitute human social worlds.

There has been a continuous development in the way animals have been viewed over the course of human history. The totems that the tribal societies (for instance, Native Americans) identified with were eventually supplanted by divine animals or animal gods (animal figures as gods) in the early human settlements. These gods were anthropomorphic figures that represented a particular aspect of human existence (e.g., Anubis, the ancient Egyptian god of the dead, represented by the figure of a human with the head of a jackal). By the Middle Ages, animals were begun to be chiefly seen in symbolic and allegorical terms. They were used as talking or anthropomorphic figures in fables for didactic purposes representing all that is vile and vicious in humans.

Today, the predicament of animals has obviously culminated in their extinction and suffering engendered by acute human interference. The loss of direct contact with them is now been compensated by the abundance of animal images in modern societies as noted by John Berger in his *About Looking* (1980). Such a predilection for animals shows how they are an integral part of our heritage: "No animal completely lacks humanity, yet no person is ever completely human" (Sax xx). Despite our physical and symbolic relationship with animals, surprisingly we have always been anxious about the 'animal' within us. As such, "The metaphor of "the beast within" was used in the Victorian era to explain all sorts of vices, from lechery to gluttony" (Sax xix): for example, Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and The Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Alluding to the animalistic tendencies in human nature, even Sigmund Freud in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2010) divided the human mind into "id", "ego" and "super-ego", where the "id" represented the bestial, the primal and the instinctual within the humans containing repressed urges and desires.

Considering the foregoing, this essay will examine the animalization strategy used in Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008), in which the white tiger serves as a trope for the "tiger-ness" of the 'ever-so-ready to pounce' mentality of the Indian youth. The story, therefore, depicts the plight of the young Indians from the lower classes of society, who are imprisoned like tigers in their cages. The white tiger has been employed throughout Adiga's novel in several different ways to represent concepts like individualism, independence, violence, survival, and hypermasculinity as will be seen. Through the discourse of animality, this essay will argue that for the protagonist, Balram, animalizing or bestializing himself as a white tiger becomes a significant meaning-making

exercise to profess his identity and to come to terms with his immediate exploitative social reality, particularly in the context of the rising class conflict and exacerbating socioeconomic conditions in the Indian scenario. Animalization and bestialization is, therefore, a frequent occurrence in the novel. This essay investigates the act of Balram animalizing himself as the white tiger and what compels him to do so. The project falls under the umbrella of cultural anthropology and will touch on some of the theoretical ideas in the field of human-animal studies. As such, the paper does not delve into the predicament of animals but highlights the human use of animals for the formation of meaning and identity-making.

## **II. Theoretical Framework: Human-Animal Studies and Cultural Anthropology**

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that by far an important aspect of our existence has been our interaction with other animals. It is unjustified to speak of human-animal interaction and not talk about Human-animal studies. Margo DeMello in her book, *Animals and Society: An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies* (2012), describes Human-animal studies (HAS), also known as anthrozoology or animal studies, as "an interdisciplinary field that explores the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the interactions humans have with them" (4). The major aim of the field has therefore been to look at the representation of animals in literature and culture. Theoretically speaking, the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of Human-animal studies makes it difficult for it to lean on any specific theoretical paradigms or methodologies. Moreover, contrary to other disciplines defined by their separate theoretical paradigms and methodologies, HAS is defined by its subject matter: the human-animal relationship or interaction. HAS scholars are therefore known to draw from

other disciplines like legal humanities, sociology, psychology, geography, philosophy, anthropology, primatology, ethology, zoology, cultural studies and so on owing to the field's multidisciplinary-ness. HAS is not only the study of animals but the study of nonhuman animals and human animals put together. The idea is to look at the interactions between humans and animals wherever we find them where "understanding more about the behaviors and mental and emotional processes of animals, we can better understand human interactions with them" (5). Some disciplines do have theoretical frameworks which can be helpful to the study of human-animal interactions and these are primarily found in the humanities and social sciences. For this paper, I will draw on the ideas from the sub-field of cultural anthropology so that I can understand the human view of animal metaphors and symbolism. This will in turn help in understanding at large the role played by animals in literature such as the novel in question.

Animals have always been of interest to anthropologists. In fact, "anthropology has taken seriously the idea that humans are one kind of animals" (*Teaching* 145). Cultural anthropology, which is the study of contemporary human cultures, has:

looked at animals as resources within human social and economic systems, as symbolic stand-ins for nature and savagery, as totems and symbols, and as mirrors for creating cultural and personal identity (DeMello 21).

For instance, in his work on totemism (1962), anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss acknowledges the utility of animals for representing social classifications such as clans. For him, animals are metaphorically important not because of their material significance but because they are "good to think with" (288). Clifford Geertz's (2005) analysis of the Balinese cockfight is

another important work of cultural anthropology dealing with animals where he contends that "the Balinese express tensions and conflict among themselves by using roosters as human stand-ins" (*Teaching* 147). Such works show how animals have been critical prisms to observe and analyse human customs and cultures. Given this, the analysis in this paper will be directed towards the human use of animals in thinking and talking about self and others.

Adiga's *The White Tiger* is a thought-provoking novel that explores the themes of classism, identity, and self-discovery in Indian society. The protagonist, Balram Halwai embarks on a journey of self-discovery that involves him embracing his animalistic side in order to assert his identity and gain power in society. For its approach, the paper can be called out for being delimiting as it minutely distances itself from the tenets of HAS for not having animals as the object of its study. However, talking about "animals . . . as [even] cultural symbols and as linguistic metaphors, similes, and slurs" (DeMello 14) can speak volumes about their existence. This paper is therefore an exploration of the human condition through animals as a metaphor. It proposes to explore the significance of self-animalization, a recurring theme throughout the book.

### III. "The Beast Within": Balram or the White Tiger

Scholars in recent years have explored the trope of animalisation to investigate the exploitation of people and the socio-economic context in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. In "Fables of the Tiger Economy: Species and Subalternity in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" (2014), Sundhya Walther contends that the novel appropriates animality to portray an animalisation of the subaltern (the poor) that is at variance with the narratives that eulogise India's economic growth. In doing

so she explores the ideas of “becoming-animalized” and the Deleuzo-Guattarian “becoming-animal” to investigate “the possibility of transgressive and powerful multispecies alliances” (580). “Interspecies identification” is thus one of the key representational strategies of the novel (580). Walther’s research is pivotal in that it examines the human protagonist of the novel, Balram’s recognition of “his own animalization as result of his subaltern position” “through identification with the nonhuman other” (580). This shows how in literature writers have used animality as a trope to indicate the bestial in human nature more so as a strategy to dehumanise (or racialise) the subaltern or the marginalised. However, the opposite of this is also true. Animalisation can have subversive elements which can assert effectively the agency of the oppressed rather than result in their othering. In “The Beast Within: Animalization in Angela Carter’s Revision of “Little Red Riding Hood” (2014), Katarzyna Wielgus analyses Carter’s revisionary tale by examining the “subversive strategy of animalisation” (189). By borrowing “principles of Post-structuralism, Postmodernism, and especially Post-colonialism and Feminism,” she challenges the “existing disregard of the strategy of animalization” as a “traditionally negative concept” (190). Working along similar lines, this paper will also explore “subversive animalization” (193) as an instrument of identity formation.

Adiga’s novel is a story of the Indian marginalised youth in general and of the victimised protagonist in particular. It is the narrative of a poor village boy from Laxmangarh, named Balram Halwai who breaks the stringent class structure by murdering his employer, Ashok and goes from rags to the top of the capitalist hierarchy of the “new” entrepreneurial India. The journey of Balram from downtrodden childhood to being a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore is

emblematic of the rhetoric about India being the fastest-growing economy at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The title and story of the novel itself are suggestive of, as Walther notes:

the trope of animalization . . . as a metaphor for the inhumanity of India’s economic growth and as a way to conceptualize the ruthlessness of emergent social structures in this context (580).

So, when Balram says, “I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness” and “India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness” (Adiga 14), he is directly referring to this lopsided economic growth which benefits the poor and the rich unequally. He undertakes a quest for identity and status in a country steeped in tradition, corruption and class conflict. Balram’s self-animalisation is a conscious act of surrender of his humanity in order to obtain power in a social milieu that only acknowledges the privileged few.

Self-animalisation can be described as the act of embracing one’s animalistic nature by renouncing one’s humanity. There are numerous instances when Balram either animalises himself or is animalised by others either as a country-mouse, a pig, a donkey or a dog in the novel. He refers to himself and others like him as “half-baked” (10) when attempting to return to his former role as a conventional servant, as though he had become less of a person and more of an animal:

The way I had rushed to press Mr. Ashok’s feet, the moment I saw them, even though he hadn’t asked me to! Why did I feel that I had to go close to his feet, touch them and press them and make them feel good—why? Because the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison

are poured into Mother Ganga.  
(193)

The desire to break out of traditional social strictures is evident in Balram's tone. The need to separate himself from his surroundings in order to establish his identity is also very strong with him: "I'm not a sentimental man . . . I am a man of action . . ." (12). For him, individual action is the key to breaking out of "The Great Indian Rooster Coop" (Adiga 175), a socio-economic framework, an animalistic system that oppresses and confines people inside its borders, much like roosters in a cage. Balram's characterization of himself and others as animals grows increasingly clear in the face of deteriorating socioeconomic reality as he continues to employ animal imagery and metaphors to describe his environment and the individuals he meets. This becomes evident when he identifies the predicament of the working class through the imagery of the rooster coop which has been put in place to "keep other servants from becoming innovators, experimenters, or entrepreneurs" (194) making it hard "for a man to win his freedom in India" (19). According to Balram, "99.9 percent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market" (175). It is a system of exploitation where:

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 at you with a curse (176).

In a context where "The trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (175), Balram deliberately chooses to identify with the white tiger, "The creature that gets born only once every generation in the jungle" (276), a

title received from his school inspector, who thinks of him as "an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots," and therefore deeming him worthy of metaphorically resembling "the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation . . . The white tiger" (35). In fact, while writing a series of letters to the Chinese Premier to relate to him his story, from the very onset of the novel, he describes himself as thus:

*From the Desk of:*

'The White Tiger'

A Thinking Man

And an entrepreneur

Living in the world's centre of  
technology and outsourcing

Electronics City Phase 1 (just off  
Hosur Main Road),

Bangalore, India. (3)

To Balram adopting an animalistic side is critical for survival and success in a society dominated by corrupt and exploitative systems. Besides, it is interesting to note why he only identifies himself with the white tiger not with any other animal when he wants to assert his power or when he is in a position of some dominance. Balram's self-animalisation in the novel is a reaction to his surroundings. He lives in a world where class struggle runs deep and the poor are repressed and denied opportunity. As can be seen, rejecting his humane side for an animalistic one is the only way he can attain control and dominance over his environment. It is precisely this scenario for which "It would, in fact, take a White Tiger" to deal with (177). In a society where:

. . . the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law . . . the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies (63-64)

It is only the white tiger that can withstand oppression. Balram's transition into the white tiger, an extremely rare species demonstrates his will to go to any length to survive and get to the top. Thus, it is only in the figure of the white tiger that he finds his truest agency and self-assertion despite being animalised variously as different animals. The tiger is known to be a solitary animal and a skilful hunter. The animal has been symbolised varyingly in different cultures. Susie Green, in her book, *Tiger* (2006) notes how the tiger is:

. . . sleek and exotic, its rippling muscle hidden beneath lustrous velvet fur, embodies things far more fundamental and primordial: the essences of male and female sexuality and their attendant energies; lithe sensuality; potency, fecundity and procreation. The tiger, unlike the lion, gregariously congregating in savannah and plain, its life an open book, is a creature of mystery, of darkness and magic. (36)

The tiger being a symbol of freedom, individuality and power becomes an important identity-creating metaphor for Balram.

In Geertz's study, Balinese cockfighting is a "metasocial commentary" (Geertz 82) about human relationships in Balinese society. He "suggests that Balinese cockfighters see their birds as the symbolic representation of the men such that it is really the men fighting for their own honor in the ring" (DeMello 296). In this sense, the cockfight is a highly meaningful and meaning-making exercise for the Balinese. The same can also be said about the bull-taming sport of *Jallikattu* in Tamil Nadu where the bull portray as a symbol of masculinity (Dalal and Raghavan 2018). Along the same lines, Balram's identification with the white tiger makes his existence meaningful. By identifying with the white tiger, he can appropriate

qualities traditionally associated with the animal. The "imagine yourself in the cage" sign in the "National Zoo in New Delhi, near the cage with the white tiger" makes him realise the predicament of his situation where he feels "trapped in the Rooster Coop" (Adiga 177). Balram's kinship with the entrapment of the white tiger presents him with the justification and validation he needs to rise to the top of the social ladder at all costs:

All this dreaming I'm doing—it may well turn out to be nothing. See, sometimes I think I will never get caught. I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Mr. Ashok—who, for all his numerous virtues, was not much of a master—to be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace them. (320)

Self-animalisation enables Balram to acquire authority and proclaim his individuality. It facilitates him to move up the social ladder by leaving behind his current social status as a servant and as an individual from lower caste. Becoming the white tiger makes him capable of bigger things; it is a personality that does not submit to societal institutions and in the process, leads to freedom—the white tiger is finally free:

. . . I am now one of those who cannot be caught in India. At such moments, I look up at this chandelier, and I just want to throw my hands up and holler, so loudly that my voice would carry over the phones in the call-center rooms all the way to the people in America:

*I've made it! I've broken out of the coop!* (320)

Violence becomes the answer. Resorting to violence helps Balram with self-animalisation. It is the violence that brings him as close as he can get to be the white

tiger. The major trait of Balram is his metaphorical transformation into a white tiger and this culminates in his desire to break out of the rooster coop by slitting his master's throat (very much in a tiger-like fashion) and stealing his capital:

Yet even if all my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor—even if they throw me in jail and have all the other prisoners dip their beaks into me—even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose—I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat.

I'll say 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.  
(320-321)

Equally important is to note that Balram also suffers from the complexities of self-animalisation. By denying his humanity he has become less compassionate and more selfish. Regarding himself as superior to others who have not embraced their animalistic side has isolated and estranged him from others. He eventually becomes "a white tiger [who] keeps no friends [because] . . . It's too dangerous" (302) thereby appropriating the tiger-like qualities to justify his actions and profess his identity as a ruling class predator. Self-animalisation is therefore important in the novel since it represents Balram's search for identity and his defiance of the system that holds him back:

Why had my father never told me not to scratch my groin? Why had my father never taught me to brush my teeth in milky foam? Why had he raised me to live like an animal? Why do all the poor live amid such filth, such ugliness? (151)

Moreover, self-animalisation forces characters to reconsider how they perceive themselves and their community. It brings into question how social hierarchies are produced, as well as how existing systems might be repressive and dehumanizing. Balram's self-animalisation is, therefore, a way of resisting the repressive and demeaning world in which he lives: "But sometimes what is most animal in a man may be the best thing in him" (251). He isolates himself from the system that degrades and denies him respect by becoming the white tiger.

#### IV. Conclusion: What Lies Ahead?

As witnessed, self-animalisation is a recurring theme in the novel. Adiga's narrative emphasizes the hardships and complexity of identity creation in a classist society where the ramifications of societal hierarchy bear hard on the characters belonging to marginalised sections. Self-animalisation hence serves as an instrument in Balram's struggle for individuality and opposition to the exploitative system that keeps him from climbing the class hierarchy. While self-animalisation has both positive and negative consequences for Balram, it forces him to reconsider his own immediate reality and the repressive institutions that have been erected. Balram therefore distances himself from the oppressive and degrading culture in which he lives by embracing his animalistic side, by becoming a white tiger. This brings us to consider the significant role that animal imagery and metaphor play in the novel. Animals are both like and unlike us. Because of this, they are a perfect instrument to express our views about ourselves, to ourselves. As seen in the novel, we animalise people to dehumanise them and anthropomorphise animals to humanise them. This back-and-forth process of subjugation and exploitation has been a defining aspect of our history

regarding animals. We use animals to highlight good qualities in people and use them to talk negatively in order to denigrate communities. What animals, therefore, do for us is to enable us to express ideas about human identity in various ways. No two animals are culturally and socially similar since they have different notions associated with them. In this regard, exploring why Balram only identifies with a white tiger and not with any other animal can be an interesting exercise to lead future research on this issue.

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