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Ideology of Politics in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

Abstract

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) can easily be placed in the gamut of Cultural Studies since it shares most of the features of this school. For example, it can easily be analyzed as a form of cultural resistance to homogenizing capitalism, as the emphasis throughout is on the particularities of the proletariat suppressed under the dominant high culture. But what strikes one as odd is that this particular class has been undermined in the text to such an extent that the writer not only fails to redefine the social order but also ends up as a spokesperson of the conventional Eurocentric perspective of the East to the extent that it has led literary critics to debate how far he fits a Western cosmopolitan model of writing. This article, therefore, attempts to unravel these diametrically opposite strands in the fabric of *The White Tiger* as Adiga while silencing certain voices ends up allowing the narcissism of the Western culture raise its garrulous head.

Keywords: Cultural studies, Economic exploitation, Cultural ethos, Orientalist thought, Counter-hegemonic culture, Class conflicts.

Introduction

The White Tiger undoubtedly falls into the "imaginative geography" of the orientalist thought that constructed and thrived on the conceptual divide between the first and third worlds. Edward Said identified three points in *Culture and Imperialism* that manifest decolonizing cultural resistance. One is the necessity to see the community's history whole, coherently and integrally. The second is the need to interrogate the assumptions of imperialist discourse and replace them with a more playful narrative style. And, the third is to pull away from nativism/or separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and liberation.³

The entire history of Indian English novel can broadly be divided into two periods: pre-independence and post-independence. The pre-independence novelists mainly wrote under the influence of Gandhism and nationalism. They devoted their novels on the one hand, to the exposition of social evils, customs and traditions, rites and rituals, poverty and illiteracy and on the other, made their works a powerful medium of highlighting the East-West encounter and of spreading the nationalistic ideas. The theme of freedom struggle occupied an important place among the major concern of pre-independence English novels.

The most significant feature of the post-independence novels produced during the period 1950-1980 was a shift of emphasis from the external to the internal. The socio-political issues: the individual problems, Industrialization, urbanization, globalization and modernization constitute the minor themes recurrently and consistently used in the post-independence novels. The scenario of urban life represented by pictures of the chaos raised voices and ragging tempers, squalors, honkers caught the attention of the distinguished novelists like V.S. Naipaul, R.P. Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandaya and Aravind Adiga. India's economic growth is continuously increasing at par to America. But the conditions of poor people remain the same. Their wages have been increased only marginally.

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This is the main theme that Aravind Adiga focused in his novel *The White Tiger* which has won the Man Booker Prize in the year 2008. This book also happens to be his debut novel. According to Adiga, these poor people mostly hail from Bihar, Nepal and Bangladesh. They work as drivers, cooks, domestic help, gardeners, construction workers and as full-time servants and fulfill all needs of their masters. Adiga's *The White Tiger* mainly focuses on the problems of poor people who are living under crushing poverty. As Adiga puts in *The White Tiger*,

"These people were building homes for the rich, but they lived in tents covered with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh...the slum ended in an open sewer-a small river of black water went sluggishly past me, bubbles sparkling in it and...two children were splashing about in the black water" (260).

The protagonist in Adiga's novel, Balram Halwai, is one such servant from Bihar. He is narrating his complete journey from the small village called Laxmangarh, Bihar to the IT city Bangalore. He is the narrator of the story and confesses his act to the Chinese Premier. Being an intelligent but poor boy who discontinues his studies due to the family circumstances and who was nick named by a school inspector as *The White Tiger*, Balram gets a job as a driver for a corrupted business man Ashok at Delhi. Being humiliated so many times by his master and his family, Balram adopts a dreadful way to become an entrepreneur. His master shows false sympathy to him but leaves no chance to humiliate him. Apart from that, they have framed Balram as a murderer, for that he was asked to sign a statement stating that he has killed a child while driving. Actually Pinky, Ashok's wife, killed a child while driving in a drunken state. These pressures made him kill his master and abscond with the money of his boss that was kept for bribing a politician. He finds no other way to come up in life. He started a taxi company at Bangalore and became a successful entrepreneur. Here the author shows the mentality of the protagonist is like *The White Tiger* which is different from other animals and it is dangerous also. Balram wants to lead a life independently like *The White Tiger* and he too is dangerous.

India is the world's greatest democracy, yet the poor people are in the same condition. They do not have freedom or power to do anything. The main focus of Adiga's novels is that even though India is a developing economy the poor are still under poverty line. They have very little political freedom especially in a place like Bihar. Adiga gives a true picture about election

period and political power of poor Indians and the failure of India's election system. Finger prints of all the youngsters whether they are eighteen or below has been taken by the stork and he will just sell it to the social activists and earn so much money. Poor people then work for this social activist till the election is over and vote for him dreaming of some better life but they will get only 'mutton biryani' on paper plates as the politicians will never turn back. They transferred the money into a bank account in a small, beautiful country in Europe full of white people and black money. As he puts in *The White Tiger*,

These are the three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera, and election fever. The last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say in (Adiga 99).

Even in an interview Adiga's remark about Indian politics is as follows:

The fact is that a lot of Indians have very little political freedom, especially in the north of India. Their elections are rigged in large parts of the north Indian state of Bihar, and they are also accompanied by violence. There is like thirty-five killings during every election. If you were a poor man you would have to pick China over India any day because your kids have a better chance of being nourished if you are poor. Your wife is more likely to survive childbirth. You are likely to live longer. There are so many ways in which India's system fails horribly (Sawhney 2008).

This enthralling work attacks poverty and inequality without being sentimental or snooty, and for this reason it is a groundbreaking Indian novel. Here Adiga talked about all the problems of poor people in the modern economy. Balram is the living example of the sufferings of poor people. In the childhood, Balram has to discontinue his studies due to poverty. He lost his father due to tuberculosis. Adiga explains how poor people are treated at the government hospitals and how they die without the treatment of the doctors. Here we can understand how the doctors are appointed under the influence of social activists by bribing them.

The condition of government hospital is even worse. In India we can see the rich people hiring many servants for all their work like drivers, watchmen, cooks, laundrymen, etc. Sometimes one man does all the work. These rich people are pitiless. The drivers are treated like servants. As Adiga remarks in *The White Tiger*,

Now, I say they took me as their 'driver'. I don't exactly know how you organize your servants in China. But in

India-or, at least in the darkness-the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants (68).

Adiga's *The White Tiger* is completely from a servant's perspective. Because Balram was humiliated by all his masters, he wants to take revenge that leads to murder. Balram wants to come out of the rooster coop. So he robs and kills his own master to become rich. Here he takes this step due the feelings of revenge.

In the program, 'You Ask the Question', replying to a query on poverty, internal unrest and terrorism in India, Adiga says:

These problems have been brewing for a long time. The causes are complex, but one common theme I find is the heightened tension within the country that's caused by the growing gap between the rich and the poor.

Balram is a representative of the poor in India longing for 'tomorrow'. His story is an allegory of the new India with a distinctly chilling twist. He is not only an entrepreneur but also a roguish criminal, remarkably capable of self-justification. The background which he operates in is one of corruption, inequality and poverty.² Since the gap between haves and have-nots is on the rise, the violence and dissatisfaction are on the rise.

According to Adiga, the ever-widening gap between the rich people and the poor and the economic system makes the rich people to prosper at the expense of the poor. The poor people serve the masters for their welfare as the farmers serve the landlord.

In a country like India, development projects, massive privatization and labor reforms makes the poor more poor. Adiga says India has become a globalized country but poor people are in the same state as they were before. As Indian literature is witnessing major changes, caste, class and gender issues and similar social concerns have emerged as dominant themes in the literature being produced in English and other various languages, for example, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. India's untouchables are mounting a revolution against privileged upper caste.

They are breaking their thousand years of silence and trying to sensitize the society. Education and exposure to literature have helped the untouchables to move forward from their ideas of contamination and pollution forced upon them by the upper castes. In the post-colonial era, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, Arundhati

Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* have truly documented the social history of the poor people. Together they constitute a powerful critique of the moral corruption and hypocrisy of Indian society which allows untouchability to continue. The work offers a kaleidoscopic portrait of modern India. The social novels encapsulate the pain, humiliation and poverty of this community which has lived at the bottom of India's social pyramid for millennium. There are truly inspiring books that reveal the untouchable's quest for dignity and the recognition of their human worth rather than to India's own succession eradicating the evils of caste system, for its inequalities and inequities persist. These novels are a sign that change is possible in India and that indeed it is progressing.

Adiga stands in the front line of Indian writing in English and is the perfectionist in the representation of his characters. He is undoubtedly the greatest artist of Indian writing in English. Adiga's main theme is deeply rooted in the social conditions of modern India. India's socio-economic inequality is the major concern and his characters represent the patterns of Indian society. He represents a society charged with the evils of untouchability, caste discrimination and social injustice. He is the greatest realist whose realism distinguishes him from any wrong bias and has the ability to take a balanced view of man and society.

Adiga voices the most fundamental sentiments of a man whose life is a strange combination of helplessness, anger, protest despair and anxiety. The typical Indian lives a life of many layers, each of which is inextricably linked up with others. Poverty is one such layer and it is a very vital thing for him. Adiga's realism lies in the depiction of a society in which corruption factor operates so easily and naturally.

It is evident that the modern society is inescapably in the grip of the menace of divide between the marginalized and the privileged, the mighty and the weak. The privileged and the might on the one hand enjoy an upper hand in all matters and miss no opportunity in staking claim over wealth. They should naturally and equitably fall to the share of all those who are born on this earth. They spend this wealth on their physical comfort and personal glory; whereas the underprivileged are forced to live from hand to mouth, notwithstanding their diligence and austerity. Given these conditions, the rich are growing richer and the poor poorer.

This sorry state of affairs has been the focus of the works of a host of Indian English writers. While Mulk Raj

Anand in pre-independence era made a mark of highlighting the afflictions of weaker sections of society, the contemporary writers such as Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Adiga have established themselves as pioneers of the cause of subaltern through their extensive treatment of subaltern concern in their trend-setting literary works which have gained immense popularity across the globe. Aravind Adiga shows the actual politics of society in many aspects. This novel portrays the exploitation of poor people. Politics is seen

in every field whether it is within the house or outside. He presents all the norms of the society.

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