



ARAVIND ADIGA'S 'THE WHITE TIGER' - A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

*Postcolonial theory is concerned with a range of cultural engagements such as the impact of imperial language upon the colonized subjects, the effects of European education and the links between western knowledge and colonial power. Postcolonial theory is nothing but the response of the colonized to the colonizer. Aravind Adiga's **The White Tiger**, can rightly be called as the postcolonial Indian English novel. It is a critique on the so-called progress and prosperity dictum 'India Shines' chanted over and over by the then ruling political party. The novel demarcates a long conflicting gap between the educated, wealthy capitalists and the rustic, illiterate proletarians. The subjugated or the subaltern are subjected to suffer culturally, socially, politically and professionally at the hands of the capitalists. The paper focuses on the way Balram Halwai rises in life to the fullest using the postcolonial theory of suffering which leads to protest and later to fight with the colonizer and reach great heights though by foul means, and stand as a spokesperson for the suppressed class.*

Key words: subaltern, subjugation, freedom, colonized, raised voice

INTRODUCTION

Indian writing in English is on par with the vernacular languages in quality and quantity; hence critically evaluating a work applying various discourses like colonial, postcolonial, postmodern and the likes has increased by leaps and bounds in recent times. It has paved a

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way for cultural synthesis of various nations. Since the beginning of their career as writers in 1930s, the Indian writers were much influenced by their colonial encounter with the British. In addition, their contact with the literature of other colonized countries made them present the humiliations and oppressions of the Indians under the colonial power which in turn made the downtrodden to raise their voice and question their colonized status. Moreover the late twentieth century has given rise to debatable issues regarding not only the key concepts of postcoloniality but also the term postcolonial itself. While agreeing to some extent with the views of the critics that post colonialism intersects other literary theories like postmodernism, structuralism and feminism, Hutcheon points out that “what writes all these different, even opposing positions on the meaning of the postcolonial is a shared stake in the psychological and social analysis of colonial identity on the collective and individual levels” (Hutcheon, 1995:11). The term postcolonial itself includes “all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the

Postcolonial theory is concerned with a range of cultural engagements such as the impact of imperial language upon the colonized subjects, the effects of European education and the links between western knowledge and colonial power. In other words, postcolonial theory is nothing but the response of the colonized to the colonizer. By appropriating the colonizer’s language, the colonized tries to express his struggle over his identities of place, history, race and culture, and also his struggle to voice the reality of his self through education he had received to the global audience. Thus Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, the Man Booker Prize winning novel published in 2008 can rightly be called as the postcolonial Indian English novel. It is a critique on the so-called ‘progress and prosperity’ dictum India Shines chanted over and over by the then ruling political party. Though criticized bitterly by the Indian elite that the book ‘had taken us back three decades’, ‘focusing on everything that is bad and disgusting’, Aravind Adiga in fact presents the real picture of the deprived sections in India; the poor masses who constitute over seventy percent of Indian population and their perennial suffering in the society that is ruled by the privileged classes who constitute over twenty percent of Indian population. Deprivation, loneliness, alienation, subjugation, resignation, and neglect mark their lives and relegate them to the status of the subaltern who cannot speak. They have no spokesperson to speak about them which forces them to suffer helplessly and get no place at all in the history and culture of which they are the essential part. By depicting the life of the poor and the innocent, the author attacks the rotten political system, economic structure, degradation of moral values and increased corruption in every walk of life in India. When the country goes through all these evils the author wonders how anyone could give a slogan like ‘India shines’. He reiterates that the novel is nothing but an attack on the story of growth and development in India:

At a time when India is going through great changes and with China, is likely to inherit the world from the West, it is important that writers like me try to

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highlight the brutal injustices of society.... Criticism by writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens in the 19th century helped England and France to become better societies. That's why I am trying to do – it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination.

(Quoted by Krishna Singh).

He further states that his novel “attempts to catch the voice of the men you meet as you travel through India – the voice of the colossal underclass. According to him, the novel was written to capture the unspoken voice of the people from the “darkness” – the impoverished areas of the rural India, and he “wanted to do so with sentimentality or portraying them as mirthless humorless weaklings as they are usually” (Young, 2012). Though India claims to be in the race of becoming a super power due to its booming economy, it is still nearer to darkness. The author brings forth this dark side of India by highlighting a number of issues related to the new world order such as multinational capitalism, global imperialism, class and caste discriminations, the myth of India shining or drowning etc.

The White Tiger is a book about a man's quest for freedom. Balram Halwai works his way out of his low social status and overcome the social obstacles that have limited his family in the past to the fullest that he can. He uses the metaphor of the Rooster Coop to speak about his life in the city. “Go to Old Delhi Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages They know they are next, yet they cannot rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. the very same thing is done with humans in this country (147). The Coop represents life in the darkness: the life where roosters or the people cannot choose their fate, where they live in poverty, where they see themselves and their families in deplorable conditions, where they inevitably will live and die without even thinking of any escape. The novel is somewhat a memoir of his journey to finding his freedom in India's modern capitalist society. It is a record of his journey from the son of a rickshaw puller, himself an underdog working in a tea stall, to a successful industrialist in Bangalore mainly due to the brutal killing of his employer Ashok Sharma and taking his name. By recording the important events in Balram's life, the author presents an authentic picture of the real India. Though he depicts two extreme sides of India - the Darkness and the Light – the author's focus is more on a subaltern's rise from the darkness to the light though on a crooked note reflecting the double vision of our society.

Born in India's overarching darkness of perpetual servanthood and poverty, Balram seeks a life in the light – a life of freedom and financial prosperity. Unlike the majority of the poor in India eternally pent up in the ‘Rooster Coop, he is ready to sacrifice his family for his own gain. His ambition and his inner drive propels him to commit murder to achieve freedom. To be one's own man one must break free from the darkness and live life by choosing his own path. In fact, it is his father who instills in him the thought of becoming a man , not to live

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and die as a slave thus provoking him to pursue the goal of becoming one of those men in the 'light'. He says "my whole life I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine – at least one – should live like a man" (26). In his pursuit of attaining freedom, he understands the real nature of casteism in India. "There are just two castes: men with Big Bellies, men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up" (54). Balram has a big belly – filled with the lust of freedom and of riches – the same belly that eventually provokes him to murder Ashok and give up his family for the sake of becoming a man.

In this novel Balram looks different from the children with whom he had grown in his home environment Lakshmangarh which stands for the rural India. Throughout the novel, he is referred to as The White Tiger which symbolizes power in East Asian cultures. It also stands as a symbol for freedom and individuality. A White Tiger can never be a slave; it can only be the master. It exercises power and beauty. Even a caged tiger shows its power and yearns for freedom and it waits for the right time. 'beauty' for Balram is nothing but financial prosperity and power in society. Though he lives in the midst of poor children in his school and later gets trapped in the darkness amid the poor masses who carry with them 'small bellies' Balram becomes the 'White Tiger' who escapes from the life of bondage and slavery. When he sees the caged tiger in the zoo, he gets hypnotized by its movements. For a while he identifies himself with the caged tiger: "The tiger was hypnotizing himself by walking like this – that was the way he could tolerate this cage" (237). After sometime when he feels that the tiger vanishes from the cage, he also wishes to put an end to his life of servitude. He becomes a changed man. He realizes that he should kill Ashok to become his own man and enter into the light of freedom. After killing Ashok with a broken liquor bottle, he shouts in excitement: "I've made it! I've broken out of the coop!" (275). By resisting the life of darkness and by revolting against the oppressive forces, he enters into a life that gives him a chance to choose his own fate. He enters into the shoes of Ashok: he becomes his own man as per the wish of his father. He frees himself from servitude and enters into the life of independence. In his new role as Ashok, Balram finds great success. He launches a taxi service for call centre workers which he calls 'White Tiger Technology Drivers'. By bribing the police, Balram gains influence and makes his business successful. Politically also, he becomes so powerful that he covers a fatal accident through his connection with the political and government authorities. He considers himself to be a quintessential entrepreneur that represents the future of India and presents himself as such to the Chinese Premier.

Balram Halwai relates his story in the form of seven letters written to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao in seven consecutive nights (but never posted) because he believes that "the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white skinned man has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse" (Tiger, 5-6). Here he speaks about the shining India where there is rapid growth in the fields of science and technology, space, real estate, information technology, expansion

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of cities, emergence of multinational companies and successful entrepreneurial skills. “You Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don’t 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.” (4). When he speaks about the brightness of the metropolitan cities, he also focuses on the dreary side of India – the darker side where there were crimes like murder, manipulation, opportunism, corruption in all departments which are justified as part of path to success. Here Balram makes a prediction: “In twenty years’ time, it will be just us yellow man and brown man at the top of the pyramid, and we’ll rule the whole world”. (305). Ashok also feels the same about the future India. “Things have changed so much in India. There are so many more things I could do here than in New York.... The way things are changing in India now, this place is going to be like America in ten years”. (89) This way the metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Bangalore are found to be on the brighter side of India at the outset; but in reality these cities are in the grip of corruption and abject poverty. Poverty-stricken people throng to the cities in search of work and a better place to live in; but they merely end up living in the streets while the rich enjoy themselves in palatial buildings completely oblivious to the misery around them.

Adiga’s novels are quite provocative in the sense that the harsh realities that he depict in his novels prick the politicians, bureaucrats and the entrepreneurs who also play the role of king-makers involved in amassing riches at the expense of the common man making them marginalized. The India that Adiga presents consists of feudal landlords who are described as ferocious animals devouring everything that comes their way and find delight in subjugating and exploiting the poor. He gives the rich landlords the names of Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar And Raven. Stork owns the river and feeds like leech on every fisherman by collecting commission. Wild Boar, his brother, owns the rich agriculture land around Lakshmangarh who feeds on the daily labourers working on daily wages. The Raven who owns the worst dry land squeezes the goatherds when they take their flocks for grazing in the hills. On the other hand, Buffalo, the greediest of all, does not leave even the rickshaw pullers. He collects commission from them for using the roads. They enjoy full support of the regional political parties as they also are the shareholders of this commission. The author presents these exploitative situations as some of the reasons for the spread of naxalism. The exploited youth turn to naxalism and the poor become victimized at the hands of the police and the bureaucrats when there was a bloody fight between the naxals and the landlords who had their own private armies. These goondas go around the villages torturing people who are suspected of sympathizing with the naxals.

Social equality and equal opportunity for everyone is still an unfulfilled dream in ‘the shining India’. Though Indian law vehemently emphasizes that there is no caste and class discriminations in India, caste system continues to be the major feature defining a person’s

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social standing and reputation. Though most of the people appear to be broad-minded regarding caste, it is in fact deep-rooted in their nerves. The old driver asks Balram “What caste are you” (56). Stork also asks a similar question: “Halwai What caste is that – top or bottom?” (62) A Muslim hides his identity by calling himself Ram Prasad to get a job as servant in Stork’s house as he knows that his landlord does not like Muslims. He even goes to the extent of asking his grandson, whose passion for cricket provokes him to call himself Azharuddin, the former Indian Captain, “call yourself Gavaskar. Azharuddin is a Muslim.” (70). Most of the parents do not accept inter caste marriages. They either disown their children or take extreme step of killing them in the name of family honour. In Andhra Pradesh, recently one father of ‘upper caste’ got his dalit son-in-law brutally murdered in broad daylight as he had committed an unforgivable offence by marrying his daughter against his will. In another similar incident, the father killed his own daughter for disgracing the family by marrying a man of another community. These are just a few instances which speak volumes of the impact of casteism in India. Politicians speak about a casteless and classless society, but they would not practice it. Rather they exploit certain communities to come to power or to continue to be in power by bribing them with cash or kind. This is quite evident in present day political scenario as well. The politicians in order to win the elections, bank on the votes of the underprivileged sections of society by bribing them.

The novel demarcates a long conflicting gap between the educated, wealthy capitalists and the rustic, illiterate proletarians. The subjugated or the subaltern are subjected to suffer culturally, socially, politically and professionally at the hands of the capitalists. They are helpless to raise their voice and powerless to resist the exploitation and humiliation thrust on them. Though they remain inarticulate, still they have strong desire to come out of the shackles that confine them for ages. They have the instinct of rebellion but they keep themselves in check by remaining loyal to their masters. They become well acquainted to the life style of their masters, their strengths and their weaknesses and then wait for an opportunity to hit back at the center. They also have the seeds of evils in them and these evils finally force them to challenge the existing order – the man-made order of discrimination on the basis of caste and class – the oppressed revolt against the oppressor. When a subaltern is given voice, he/she can speak in a powerful language that can challenge the pillars of established social order.

In this novel, Adiga portrays the different images of India – India of Light and India of Dark but his focus is more on the latter part. He attacks the affluent and corporate giants who as the uncrowned rulers of the country control the political leaders and the government officials and make them act according to their whims and fancies. They hypnotize the general public by making them believe that the country they live in is ‘shining’ with IT boom resulting in employment for educated youth, increase of per capita income, economic growth and improvement in financial status. But in reality, the people who belong to this category are

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very few compared to the majority of Indians who still struggle to make their both ends meet. They are the victims of oppression and subjugation: they are the subaltern that cannot speak. But if a subaltern raises his voice, if he starts questioning, what would be the end result? That is what Balram has done in this novel. On watching the world around him, on seeing the treacherous ways in which people involve themselves in this 'shining India', Balram decides to shine. This is a way of protest against exploitation, and suppression of his class. As a typical voice of the colonized, he struggles to set himself free from age-old slavery and bondage. His anger and frustration make him protest and he gets involved in criminal activities and vices of the society such as prostitution, drinking, grabbing all the opportunities that come his way and even goes to the extent of killing his master and stepping into his shoes thus having his last laugh. He stands for the exploited class. By highlighting the subaltern issue, Adiga reiterates that if a country claims to be 'shining' it has to deal with the problems of 'darkness', the sufferings and tribulations of the colonized and the suppressed and bring some noteworthy change in their lives. Then only can we hope to see India 'truly shining' at least in near future. Until then it remains only in words but not in action.

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