

Voice from the Darkness: Symbolizing the Subaltern in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

The deep-rooted socio-economic inequality is rampant in India even today. The landowners, the industrialists, and the upper classes have always applied power over the poor peasants, laborers and the working classes. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the story of Balram Halwai, son of a rickshaw puller, which is considered as 'lower' in terms of the caste system. It is a Bildungsroman in many senses, Balram's journey of emancipation from deterioration and inhibition to a multi-million dollar entrepreneur. The novel is criticized by many as an exaggerated version of Indian society but similarly, there are critics who acknowledge this work as a mirror of Indian society that is why it is selected for the Man Booker Prize in 2008. In addition to that, it is included in the New York Times Bestseller list. The paper tries to analyze how the subaltern symbolized in the novel by highlighting the age-old fears and fretfulness of the downtrodden mass.

1. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is impoverished India's voice from the darkness. The story reveals Balram's journey from utter poverty to a rich entrepreneur. He was born near Bodh Gaya, the place where Gautham Budha got enlighten. Balram finds a way to break away from the traditional village, so he is constantly on the lookout of opportunities to get rid of poverty. He learns driving and finds a job at the home of the landlord of his village. Later he manages to be the favorite and got a chance to accompany the landlord's son to Delhi. There he went through many hardships to find a way in the fast-moving urban life. As he is a fast learner, he identifies that he can make money with a little dishonesty. And then he loots and murder his employer and shifted to Bangalore to seek his fortune. There he starts a car rental service which in time became a profitable business and Balram transforms into an influential member of Bangalore power circle.

2. Understanding the 'subaltern'

Subaltern in post-colonial terminology deals with subordination or inferiority in terms of race, class, and gender. But when it comes to the Indian scenario, caste comes to the forefront to decide one's subordination. Subaltern is a term that frequently overlaps with nuances of race, class, caste, and gender. It was Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist thinker, and writer, who took the word out from its military origin to represent the suppressed Italian peasantry. In *Prison Note Books*, Gramsci says, "subordinate or sometimes instrumental to denote non hegemonic groups or classes" (Gramsci, xiv) and in relation to that Stephen Morton elaborates that it is "particular to the unorganized groups of rural peasants based in Southern Italy, who had no social or political consciousness as a group and were, therefore, susceptible to the ruling ideas, culture, and leadership of the state" (Morton, 48). After the fortification of post-colonial discourses, the term has acquired the responsibility to represent the discriminated peoples of the erstwhile colonies. The concept has developed into 'Subaltern Studies' and spreads its influence over a range of disciplines.

Ranjith Guha, one of the founders of the subaltern studies group argues that:

"subaltern is a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age Gender, and office or in any other way" (Guha, 18).

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak is another advocate of the concept but she has a disagreement on the overemphasizing nature of the term and she uses it in a more specific sense. She argues:

Subaltern is not just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie In postcolonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern – a space of difference. (Spivak, 30)

In the Indian context, the term subaltern signifies communities that are communicatively and comprehensively disadvantaged and subordinated through the structure and agency of the caste system. Partha Chatterjee's words are relevant here:

"No matter how we choose to characterize it, subaltern consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution" (Chatterjee, 169).

The term subaltern entitled to many definitions but in the Indian context, it is the lower caste people who come first to serve the basic definition of the term. Sathianathan Clarke opines:

However, this formal definition will have material implications, which raises the following question: Based on a definition contingent on the caste system, which specific groupings need to be incorporated into the subaltern? There will be a general consensus that all communities outside of the caste society will form the substratum of the subaltern. Thus Dalit and Adivasi communities form the foundation of the subaltern (Clarke, 280)

3. The voice from the darkness

"Things are different in the Darkness" (Adiga, 54)

The progression of Balram constitutes the main body of the story. Even though it is centered on Balaram, the protagonist, there is a number of characters appear in the novel having been broken or seduced by the strengths of class, caste, and gender. At the beginning of the novel itself, Adiga demarcates his position on the inequality prevailing in Indian society "India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. But [the Ganges] river brings darkness to India - the black river". (14, Adiga). The society dwells in light and in darkness. Balram, who is away from his hometown he remembers his village as, "like all good stories; mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see. I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness" (14, Adiga). The writer is constantly reminding the reader about the dark side of India in a subtle way makes the plot more appealing. The village life portrayed in the novel is an open wound that still prevails in India. The lower castes were treated as a mere bodies to work for their landlords. The light and the dark remarks are plenty in the novel. The light represents the ruling class and dark represents the subaltern or the untouchables in the village. Balram himself belongs to darkness but he is desperate to escape from the darkness. His remarks after escaping from the slave life are:

" Sometimes, in my apartment, I turn on both chandeliers, and then lie down amid all that light, and I just start laughing. A man in hiding, and yet he is surrounded by chandeliers!

There I am revealing the secret to a successful escape. The Police searched for me in darkness: but I hid myself in light" (Adiga, 118).

Laxamangarh, the village in the darkness, consist of poor and loyal people who worship the monkey god *Hanuman*, the reference for the god here comes with an explanation which is preferable recounts the characteristics of the villagers: "[*Hanuman*] is shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion" (Adiga, 19). The master-slave/rich-poor relation is another important aspect of subordination:

"a rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours is different. My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into his buttocks. The story of the poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen" (Adiga, 27).

Here the writer evidently draws out the difference of appearance that makes the master and slave divide in the society. Balram also quoting his uncles circumstances:

"My uncle also did backbreaking work, but they did what everyone else did. Each year, as soon it began raining, they would go out to the fields with blackened sickles, begging one landlord or the other for some work. Then they cast seed, cut weeds, and harvested corn and paddy" (Adiga, 27).

The Indian caste system is purely based on occupation because every caste name is directly or indirectly associated with a particular occupation. When Balram seeks driving as a job he realizes how deep-rooted the system of caste is:

"how can you learn to drive . . . it is like a taming a wild stallion- only a boy from the warrior castes can manage that. You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslims, Rajputs, and Sikhs – they are fighters, they can become drivers" (Adiga, 64).

That is not the end; those who own the cars are also conscious about the caste: "are you from a top caste or bottom caste, boy... all our employers are top caste" (Adiga, 65). Wherever he goes his caste follows him. That fate is simply not for Balram alone but for anyone from the subaltern mass the fate is the same. The dogs in chains worth more than Balram's life: "Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!"(Adiga, 78). That is the harsh reality of an untouchable life.

In the novel, Balram is the 'white tiger', the one that dedicated to fulfilling his dream of "I am Tomorrow" (Adiga, 4). Balram represents the caste consciousness of Indian society. He escapes from the coop and finds his own place in the society but that is not the case for many; like the monkey God Hanuman, the slaves are so obedient:

"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)

Balram is aware of the situation; it is not possible to shake the shackles of servitude. The subaltern mind is trained by their masters for their benefit:

"Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench...The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. 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" (173).

4. Conclusion

The novel is a vertical slice of India where the majority of its population is underdeveloped and lives in poverty. The slave always remains the same as the hens and roosters in a cage waiting for their turn in the death bed.

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