

The Subaltern Can Roar: An Introspection on Adiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract

The White Tiger is the debut novel of Indian journalist turned novelist Aravind Adiga, published in 2008 and also received the prestigious Booker prize in the same year. This is a captivating story of an underdog and his adventure of becoming a master from a servant. Adiga attacks societal stratification and caste system in Indian social order with an arrow sharpened with scathing criticism. In the novel, the protagonist cum narrator explains about entrepreneurship in India to Wen Jiabao, Chinese premier, who is about to pay a visit to India in order to know about the entrepreneurship in modern India.

The protagonist of this novel is Balram Halwai, son of a poor rikshaw puller, representative of the downtrodden people. But some characteristic traits make him unique that is why his school inspector named him the white tiger. He is driven by unyielding spirit and vaulting ambition that led him to surpass all the societal obstacles and to claim his status as a successful entrepreneur. Destiny puts him in a situation where there was no escape. He decides to kill his master and run away with his money to evade the life of eternal slavery. Eventually, he established himself as a rising entrepreneur based in Bangalore. Balram is the spokesperson, the voice of underclass, explores Adiga's point of view about the power dynamics and social relationship between the elite class and marginalized people in our society.

This article is a social critique that shows wealth and power are the determining factors of all social disparities and how the marginalized class has been affected since ages by all these factors. Balram Halwai, the voice of underdog, declares war against the age old oppression of upper class through his ruthless venture of becoming a successful entrepreneur by shattering the shackle of lifelong slavery.

Keyword: White Tiger, Underclass, Society, Caste system, Class, Subalternity

Introduction

Indian English novel from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Rajmohan's Wife (1864) to Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1979), from Arundhati Roy's God of Small Things (1997) to Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger (2008) has been achieved many remarkable milestones.

Indian English fiction can be classified under two prominent categories: pre-independence and post-independence or postcolonial. During the British colonial rule the main focus of Indian English fiction was primarily on freedom struggle and Gandhian non-violent movement. After India got independence a drastic transformation in the matter of theme and subject of Indian English fiction can be witnessed. The point of focus has been altered from external to internal issues. Writers of the present time depict the effect of colonial rule in both physical and psychological aspects, socio-political and cultural condition of our society and life of marginalised people. The approach of today's novelist is very much straight forward than their precursor.

Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger has highlighted India's rising economic power and its role in social inequality. This novel presents a complex narrative of Balram Halwai, a low-caste servant who surpasses

his subaltern status to become a successful entrepreneur. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theory of subaltern, "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" This article argues that Balram's story demonstrates the subaltern's capability to withstand and counter dominant power structures.

The White Tiger: A Novel

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, a phenomenal work of fiction, published in 2008 and received prestigious Booker prize in the same year. The novel is a massive blow to the society divided into different cast and class. Despite India's remarkable economic growth, catapulting it to the 5th largest economy globally, the country still struggles with constant poverty, with millions of people living below the poverty line facing everlasting hardships and challenges.

In this novel, Balram Halwai is the representative of the lower strata of the society. But he is intelligent and always driven by greater ambition and desperation to get out of the "Rooster coop". Balram, the protagonist cum narrator, narrates the journey of his life to Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao in a letter in order to make him understand the current situation of entrepreneurship in India. He unfolds his commendable journey from Laxmangarh, Bihar to Bangalore, how he as a son of a poor rickshaw puller became a successful entrepreneur. Balram was sole intelligent boy among a bunch of dumb students in his school. One day school inspector comes to his school for inspection. During interaction with students the inspector noticed Balram's extraordinary talent and presence of mind and titled him as the white tiger, a rare species of animal that appears once in a generation.

"You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?

I thought about it and said:

The white tiger.

That's what you are, in this jungle." (Adiga 35)

His grandmother pulls him off from his school and put a stop to his education so that he could help his family to pay the loan which was borrowed at the time of his cousin's marriage, although his father wanted him to complete his education. His father 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." (Adiga 30)

He gets a job in a tea shop where he used to take interest in conversation of customers. One day he gets to know that occupation of driver offers hefty salary and immediately he makes up his mind to get into this profession. Eventually, he manages to convince his grandmother to get financial assistance. He completes his driving training and succeeds in getting a job in a landlord's house. He was appointed as a driver of Ashok, younger son of the landlord, recently returned from America along with his wife Pinky.

Adiga explores the hardships of underclass people through the sufferings of Balram's family. Poor financial condition puts a stop upon his education despite being an intelligent student. His father was died due to lack of medical treatment. Here Adiga critiqued the corruption in government medical system. Most of the govt. aided hospitals are full of ineligible doctors as they are being recommended and recruited in exchange of bribe by local politicians. There are open auctions for the post of doctors and the price of one post is around "four hundred thousand rupees only!" Here the author mirrors the harsh reality of govt. health sectors and its effect in life expectancy of poor people in rural area.

“Kishan and I carried our father in, stamping on the goat tards which had spread like a constellation of black stars on the ground. There was no doctor in the hospitals. The ward boy, after we bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening. The doors to the hospital’s room were wide open; the beds had metal springs sticking out of them, and they began staring at us the moment we stepped into the room” (Adiga 48)

“It is not safe in the rooms that cat has tasted blood” (Adiga)

“Kishan and I lowered father onto the newspaper sheets, we waited there.” (Adiga)

This is how the poor people are being treated in govt. hospitals. Even a minimal hygiene is not maintained in govt. hospitals. They are deprived of basic rights offered by Indian government. Although, India is a democratic country there is no effect of democratic rights in their life. According to Balram

“India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of darkness.” (Adiga 14)

“...I was born and raised in that darkness” (Adiga 14)

In this novel Balram recounts his journey from this darkness to light, from Laxmangarh to Bangalore, from rooster coop to the jungle where he is the white tiger, the most ferocious and ruthless.

Balram Halwai: a Subaltern, a Revenger

Balram’s journey is a classic tale of class struggle and revenge. Born into poverty, he’s forced to navigate the harsh realities of India’s class stratification. Indian society exists in binary oppositions, “India of light” and “India of darkness”. The former symbolizes the dominant class, while the latter represents the oppressed class. Balram belongs to the “India of darkness” where exploitation, depravity and poverty rule over them. As Balram notices, “India is two countries in one... Ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off but the river brings darkness to India.” (Adiga 14)

This division intensifies further by lack of opportunities, exploitations and poor access to resources.

Balram grows a sense of class consciousness gradually. He comprehends that the system is fixed against him and it never recognizes his talent and possibilities. So, he decides to break free from the “Rooster Coop”- a metaphor stands for the oppressive system that limits growth and prosperity of poor people and traps them in an eternal cycle of servitude and poverty. Balram witnesses, “Servants need to abuse other servants. It’s been bred into us; the way Alsatian dogs are bred to attack strangers, we attack anyone who is familiar.” (Adiga 130) This highlights how the poor working class is shaped to oppress each other, rather than unite against their exploiters.

Balram’s desire for revenge emerges from the humiliation and exploitation he undergoes through the actions of his master. He was compelled to take the charge for Ashoke’s wife, Pinky madam’s hit and run accidents, which ignites his rage and resentment towards his master. Balram realizes later,

“A man on bicycle getting killed – the police even do not have to register a case. A man on motor bike getting killed – they would have to register a case. A man in a car getting killed – they would have thrown me in the jail.” (Adiga 309)

This shows the discrimination in judiciary and its biasness towards the wealthy. Ultimately, Balram kills Ashoke as an act of revenge that allows him to escape oppressive system and become a part of ruling class. He steals money that belongs to his master Ashok and starts a new business in Bangalore, symbolizing his rise from darkness to city lights, from rags to riches. Balram couldn’t complete his schooling but he learned about social class, culture and power structure of society from the people around him. It is as clear as daylight to him,

“To sum up-in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat-or get eaten up.” (Adiga 64)

The White Tiger: Voice of Underclass

Balram Halwai, the narrator cum protagonist of this novel is the embodiment of downtrodden people that comprised more than 50% of our society. From the hardships of his life the readers can easily perceive the plight of underclass.

Wealth and power are the driving force behind all social disparities. Poor lower class have always been subjected to oppression and deprivation at the hands of the wealthy upper class. India is a democratic republic state but the light of freedom and basic rights are still inaccessible to the “darkness”.

The British left, parliamentary democracy established but the states of underclass remain unchanged. Under the colonial rule they were tortured by British and now they are being exploited by local landlords and corrupted politicians. British colonialism has been transformed as zamindari system.

“For this land, India, has never been free. First the Muslims, then the British bossed us around. In 1947 the British left, but only a moron would think that we became free then.” (Adiga 22)

Adiga shows how the people belongs to the marginalized class die due to lack of proper medical assistance. Balram’s father was died of Tuberculosis in a government hospital where there was no doctor to treat him. That incident raises a question, what is the possible cause of death in the case of Balram’s father? Was that Tuberculosis or was that lack of proper medication? In India, where a rich politician goes abroad for treatment and in contrary, poor people are destined to breathe their last on government hospital’s floor. Adiga highlights this as one of the parameters of class segregation.

The shopping mall culture is another parameter of social disparity. Adiga has delineated a clear picture of class discrimination through the practice of mall culture.

“The guard at the door had stopped him. He pointed his stick at the man’s feet and shook his head – the man had sandals on his feet. ...But everyone who was allowed into the mall had shoes on their feet. ...the man in the sandals exploded, am I not a human being too?” (Adiga 148)

Balram describe his village, where he was born, a waste land, where everything is in degeneration, submerged in utter darkness. Nobody could expect medical aid, quality education and other basic rights there. The underclass people must bow down to local zamindar and have to accept indentured labour for the sake of two times food. Most of the young people left village for the cities to access opportunities and secure earning for the wellbeing of their family.

“I wonder if the Buddha walked through Laxmangarh - some people say he did. My own feeling is that he ran through it-as fast as he could-and got to the other side-and never looked back!” (Adiga 18)

The readers can perceive a clear trace of Mulk Raj Anand’s “Untouchables” in this novel. But Bakha’s story is more pathetic and heart wrenching than that of Balram’s. Mulk Raj Anand portrayed a single day in Bakha’s life. He belongs to the untouchables (Dalit), marked as the lowest strata of society, destined to clean the streets, latrines of wealthy people in the town while facing humiliation from the public. Unlike Adiga, Anand didn’t provide a rebel’s voice to Bakha. Adiga conferred a bold voice and rebellious attitude to Balram that made him The White Tiger. This type of characterization is unprecedented in Indian Literature and that is why this novel can be called a pathbreaking work of fiction in the field of Indian English Literature.

The marginalized poor class of India is now emerging as rebel to protest against the government officials and law makers for the sake of their rights. Gradually they are coming out of their preinstalled mindset of inferiority complex which had been ingrained tactfully into their psyche by the privileged upper class. Awareness to education and exposure to tribal literature provide the downtrodden wings to fly away from their poor condition and revolt against the capitalist society.

In this novel, through the characterization of Balram, Adiga actually resonates Spivak's theory of subalternity. The theory advocates that the subaltern can indeed speak for themselves and they are strong enough to raise their voices. The intellectuals should listen to them, understand their struggle, and allow them to speak for themselves rather than just speaking on their behalf.

A few years back we have witnessed the "Kurmi" community's 'Rail Roko' protest claiming ST status for reservation. Tribal community in Purulia and Bankura have been demanding official recognition of their Sarna/ Sari religion for a longer period of time. As a result WB assembly passed a motion seeking to recognize their religion officially.

On answering a question regarding India's internal conflict and increasing terrorism, Adiga stated that, "all such issues are developing since a long time and there are many complicated reasons but there is one common reason which is prolonged tension in India which is because of increasing gap between poor and rich. Religious protests can usually lead to outbreaks and outbursts but the original protests are usually due to economic reasons." (Adiga)

Conclusion

Adiga's *The White Tiger* has been assigned as a thunderous voice of an underdog, who is the spokesperson of those who live below the poverty line. Their pleas have remained unheard for ages. Balram's incredible rise from an impoverished family background to an entrepreneur based in Bangalore is no less a fantastic tale, from a taxi driver to a cab company owner, justifying the titular character 'White Tiger'

He was appointed as a taxi driver in landlord's house, although, he was just a servant to them.

"But in India – or, at least, in the Darkness – the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers, and tailors. They simply have servants." (Adiga 68)

He killed his master and stole his money to escape the exploitation and eternal servitude that he was destined to suffer. By killing his master, he took revenge for the age-long tyranny of the upper class to the downtrodden.

In this novel, it is evident that the subaltern not only can speak but also can roar when needed.

"Through violence, imperialists instilled a sense of inferiority in the colonized, and it was therefore through violence that the colonized could regain a sense of self, a sense of culture and the physical reality of statehood..." (Fanon, 1968)

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