

Trauma and Politics of Memory in Aravind Adiga's *the White Tiger*

Sanskriti

Researcher

Abstract

The paper offers a critical investigation of trauma and the politics of memory in *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. By exposing deep economic disparities, the novel presents a compelling portrait of post-liberalization India. It narrates corruption and class inequality through the voice of Balram Halwai, who rises from rural subjugation to become an entrepreneur. However, his success is deeply marked by psychological trauma rooted in colonial legacy and neo-capitalist exploitation. Drawing on trauma theory and postcolonial criticism, this paper examines individual memory as a narrative strategy through which Balram reconstructs his past and family history, negotiates shame, and legitimizes violence. The novel, therefore, is not merely a representation of personal suffering but also a reflection of trauma shaped by systemic conditions that entrench hierarchies of caste, class, and economic disparity. These conditions are historically linked to colonial power formations that persist within contemporary global capitalism. Balram's epistolary narration to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, functions as a performative act of remembering and self-fashioning. His selective, ironic, and morally ambivalent recollection of events reveals how memory becomes a tool for both testimony and justification. His consciousness of the "Darkness" operates simultaneously as an acknowledgment of oppression and a rationalization of resistance. Ultimately, *The White Tiger* portrays postcolonial India as a space where trauma is normalized within aspirational modernity. Through fragmented memory and calculated self-narration, Adiga reveals a rapidly transforming urban landscape in which success is often achieved through violence, erasure, and the reinvention of selfhood.

Keywords: Trauma, Politics of Memory, Violence, Neo-liberal Capitalism, Urban Marginality, Narrative Self-Fashioning, Urban Entrapment.

Review of Literature

Aravind Adiga's *the White Tiger* always captures critical insights of research scholars, critics and philosophers. Some of them are critically examined the novel according to their critical insights in their articles and research work to explore various philosophical and theoretical threads such as S. Sakthivel and Dr. S. Gansesan's "A Study of the Portrayal of Postcolonial India in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*", Dr. Raj Kumar Saini's "Cityscape: A Critical Study of Selected Novels of Aravind Adiga", Chetan Bhagat and Anita Desai, Mohua Dutta's "The Journey from 'Darkness' to 'Light': Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and the Phenomenon of Rural to Urban Internal Migration in India", M. Yahzini et al., "Trauma Narration in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*" and M.M.Kamalakamatchi's the Burden of

Memory: Trauma, and Identity in Post-colonial Narratives.”Despite of this, there are a number of fields and theoretical aspects are remained unexplored. So, I have chosen the title “Trauma and the Politics of Memory in Aravind Adiga’s *the White Tiger*.”

Introduction

Won the 40th Man Booker Prize, the novel *The White Tiger* is dealt with the tale of Indian cities like Delhi and Bangalore. Seeing as a future of Indian cities, the novel is about the adventurous deeds of Balram Halwai in a metropolitan city. According to Soumya Bhattacharya, the contemporary Indian critic, the novel is a “riveting, razor-sharp debut novel explores with wit and insight the realities of the two Indians and reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of the other... The truth, as it begins to emerge, is as shocking as it is fantastic” (qtd. in cover page *The White Tiger*).

Throughout the novel, Aravind Adiga tries to highlight that the trauma of poverty and servitude is a psychological scar produced by both the colonial past and a postcolonial present that continues to marginalize the lower classes. So, the trauma is become a symbol of the “Rooster Coop” mentality. The mentality of rooster coops represents the psychological entrapment of servants in India. Because, the rooster coops are fully aware of their fate yet unwilling to rebel, the servants remain confined by fear, social conditioning, and the constant threat of violence against their families. Even when opportunities for escape arise, their internalized fear prevents them from breaking free.

On the other hand, the transformation of Balram from a servant to an entrepreneur is shaped by the unequal oppressive environment. His journey is a violent re-enactment of the very brutality that faced and oppressed by him once. In order to escape, making free himself from the rooster coop’s care, he murders his master, Ashok, thereby becoming what he describes himself to be a pervert of nature and an agent of violence due to a corrupt system. Even though, he is committed a crime but he has no remorse for his crime. Instead, he justifies his crime is as a necessary, though brutal, response to a socio-economic structure that has dehumanized and exploited him.

Situated in the contemporary India, the novel *The White Tiger* contrasts between the symbolic between the ‘Light’ and the ‘Darkness’, civilized and uncivilized, and ruler and ruled. In the novel, the ‘Light’ presents as a symbol of the urban riches, dominance, and visibility, while the ‘Darkness’ represents the rural poverty, invisibility, and neglect. By using this oppositional structure, the novel is a demonstration of colonial mentality that is not dismantled but has been reinvented in the post modernistic society. Throughout the rural poverty and nostalgic experiences, Balram Halwai demonstrate how deeply ingrained these hierarchical patterns are such as rigid caste system, limited social mobility, economic exploitation, and political corruption in the term of getting opportunity. Even though, the novel highlights inequality and exploitation is not merely a matter of chance but a structural reality. This sustained marginalization is a kind of collective trauma that is not only individual but also intergenerational. Therefore, Balram’s individual pain is a manifestation of a larger historical and social trauma, which is defined by the continuity between colonial legacies and postcolonial failures. Balram has this to say about these individuals:

They live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the Darkness too- you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, and animal-like way they live under the enormous bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the car roars past them. These homeless people are a particular problem for drivers. They never wait for a red, simply dashing across the road on impulse. Moreover, each time I braked to avoid slamming the car into one of them, the shouting would start from the passenger's seat. (120)

In *The White Tiger*, Balram to Wen Jiabao is an alternative narrative structure that tells the ‘unvoiced perspectives’ of those living in the “Darkness” to be expressed. Through writing to a global political leader, Balram metaphorically relocates himself from a silenced servant to a proactive storyteller of the hidden truths of the nation. His narrative defies the official story of the economic, scientific, and political resurgence of India, highlighting the discrepancy between the discourse of development and the reality of the marginalized. Therefore, the novel is a form of counter-memory in which forgotten, ignored, and repressed people are a part of history. It is about the thousands of poor Indians who are left unaffected by economic development and are excluded from the promises of liberalization—especially through the confessional voice of Balram, the narrative resists selective national memory and instead highlights the violence embedded in everyday life.

Adiga also juxtaposes ‘the dirty’ truth of poverty and exploitation with the legend of a ‘Shining’ India in political discourse. Through the revelation of censored identities and erased histories, the novel subverts the celebratory narratives of progress and instead reveals the moral toll of rapid modernization. Significantly, Balram’s memories do not result in passive victimhood. Contrary to indulging in self-pity, he converts his memories into agency. His memories of humiliation and exploitation become the motivating factor for his resolve to “break the coop” and change his fate accordingly. Thus, memory becomes both a site of trauma and a source of empowerment, which enables his contentious transition from “servant” to “master.”

In *The White Tiger*, Balram embodies the ‘Rooster Coop’ mentality, a potent metaphor for psychological incarceration. The symbol itself implies not only physical incarceration but also a deeply ingrained psychological state of mind in which subjugation is normalized and revolt becomes pointless. This is a state of postcolonial trauma in which the subjugated peoples internalize their own oppression, accepting domination as a natural and inevitable part of life. Fear, especially the fear of violence against one’s family, precludes revolt, and the long-term experience of subjugation gradually hardens into identity.

Therefore, Balram’s trauma is more than simply material deprivation or economic hardship; it is deeply psychological. Balram does not serve merely out of poverty; he serves because he has been conditioned to believe that he is meant to serve. His identity is constructed within a system in which lower-class life is synonymous with servitude and invisibility. In the novel, it is illustrated the ways in which structural oppression is not only maintained through external control but also through internalized belief, making psychological liberation far more difficult than physical escape. They enjoy all the luxurious life, “... in big housing colonies like Defence colony or Greater Kailash or Vasant Kunj” (118-19) and treatment in private hospitals, “...Max, which is one of Delhi's most famous private hospitals. I stood

outside and watched as the Mongoose and the old man went inside the beautiful big glass building. Doctors walked in and out with long white coats and stethoscopes in their pockets” (180).

Set in the metropolitan city, the novel highlights the murder of Mr. Ashok by Balram is a radical break with the legacy of subjugation and class oppression. The novel reveals the strict hierarchies of postcolonial India that is represented through the metaphor of the Rooster Coop. The Rooster Coop represents the slave mentality which is a state of fear, loyalty, and violence. Outcome of this slave mentality, the killing of Mr. Ashok is not just a crime but a statement against the deeply ingrained structures of economic and social domination. Throughout the novel, Adiga tries to show that the killing of Mr. Ashok is considered as an act of violence which is a result of accumulated humiliation, decades of exploitation, erasure, and internalized subjugation. In a twisted justification, he glorifies the scene as a means of saving humanity: “I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through his brains. It's a good, strong bottle, Johnnie Walker Black—well worth its resale value”(284).

Like the other Indian English writers, Aravind Adiga has a great art of storytelling. His act of storytelling is a retroactive process whereby memory becomes more than recollection and it becomes a means of self-fashioning. Balram does not merely remember; he edits and rearranges his memories in order to legitimize his own metamorphosis from servant to entrepreneur. He also tries to share the history of oppression through the caste system, poverty in rural India, and the colonial legacy. His memories of Laxmangarh, the impoverished village mired in feudal relations, are a manifestation of what might be termed ‘a living archive of subaltern suffering.’ He also uncovers the existence of the caste system, despite being legally abolished, is sustained in the quotidian experience of humiliation, exploitation, and immobility. In this manner, the memory of Balram becomes the portal to collective trauma. As his father’s death, his grandmother’s dominance, and the landlord’s oppression are not discrete occurrences but are instead part of a larger history of domination that predates the country's independence and continues through the advent of neoliberal capitalism.

Throughout the novel, Adiga tries to explore that how the metaphor of the ‘Rooster Coop’ in the novel, is a kind of cultural memory deeply ingrained in social psychology. In this manner, he uses the metaphor of rooster coop to reveal the historically economic oppression, which determines the consciousness of subordinations, are internalized, normalized, and reproduced from generation to generation. It is a collective mental imprisonment that has been created over centuries of caste oppression, colonial domination, and feudal dependency. In this respect, it is a kind of inherited memory and an unconscious repository of subordination that regulates conduct even in the absence of overt chains.

Adiga’s metaphor of rooster coop is in its psychological sophistication. Because the roosters, who have the physical strength to escape, do not revolt because they see others being slaughtered and are conditioned to fear as a survival strategy. Likewise, the other Indian servants, in the novel, do not revolt against exploitation not only because of external force but also because conformity to oppression has been culturally valorized. As, the loyalty of servants’ to their masters, fear of punishment, and duty towards their families are all internalized policing devices. Therefore, the metaphor of Rooster Coop shows how power maintains itself not only through violence but also through psychological conditioning.

Written by Aravind Adiga, the novel *The White Tiger* presents a scathing critique of neo-liberal capitalism in post-1991 India. The novel is set in the context of the economic liberalization of India, which saw the shift from a state-controlled socialist structure to a market-oriented capitalist structure. It presents a shift brought about by the economic reforms of 1991, led by the likes of Manmohan Singh, which resulted in the opening up of the Indian economy to foreign capital, the promotion of privatization, and the promotion of competition and individual initiative. Even as this brought about a rapid growth of the Indian economy and the emergence of a new breed of entrepreneurs, it also led to a widening gap between the prosperity of the cities and the poverty of the countryside. So, the novel depicts two different India as, the India of 'Light' and the India of 'Darkness.' The Light stands for the urban centers of India, such as Bangalore, which symbolize technological progress, outsourcing hubs, and globalization. On the hand, the 'Darkness' represents the rural areas of India that are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty, corruption, and feudal politics. It is a metaphor of geographical dichotomy that imbalances the effect of neoliberal policies. While economic liberalization may have opened markets and do not disturb the deeply rooted structures of caste and class oppression. Rather, it simply transplanted them into a corporate capitalist order. The journey of Balram Halwai, from being a village servant to a Bangalore entrepreneur, symbolizes the ideals and contradictions of neoliberal ideology. Neo-liberal capitalism is all about the ideology of meritocracy—the notion that anyone can achieve anything through sheer hard work and determination. Balram is the embodiment of this ideology, because he says to himself to be a self-made man. But his journey to success is based on exploitation, trickery, and violence. His rags-to-riches story reveals the seedy side of capitalist politics, where survival is often a moral compromise.

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga dreams a vision of urban India as a contradictory terrain where hope and deep-seated inequality coexist. For him, the Metropolitan cities like Bangalore are a face of post-liberalization expansions and a place of outsourcing, IT, and globalization. But beneath the glittering corporate spires lies a massive underclass of drivers, servants, migrants, and informal sector workers who keep the city running but do not have part of its benefits. For Balram Halwai, the city of Delhi and Bangalore is a move out from the rural trap to landscape of promise, opportunity, anonymity, and transformation for him. His imagination is neoliberal imagination where his talent can overcome caste and class boundaries. But Adiga subverts this promise by showing how the city is organized around strict hierarchies. Drivers live in basement levels, servants have separate dining areas, and slums exist alongside upmarket malls and gated societies. The city does not do away with inequality; it simply rearranges it.

Adiga's metaphor of rooster coop also shows how neoliberal urbanism redefines exploitation as opportunity. As if the drivers and servants move to Delhi because they believe in the idea of upward mobility, but they are actually part of a system that is meant to maintain the same hierarchical structure. It is a cover for the continuity of oppression of them. As a result, the coop is not only destroyed by urban modernity; but also psychological marginalized. They are actually extended to include basements, parking lots, and corporate corridors. They are become psychological marginalized subjects, experiencing their own inferiority, caste conditioning, and social subjugation over the years instill a mentality in them. As Balram explains that these drivers and servants do not revolt because their families are left behind in the village, vulnerable to employer reprisal. Systemic violence is indirect; it hurts not only the individual but also his family.

Ultimately, the paper is dealt with trauma and memory which are deeply intertwined with class struggle and power politics. Throughout the paper, it is found that the contemporary society is designed to exploit the individuals. These individuals are used memory as a tool to show and negotiate identity, justify resistance, and expose hypocrisy. Thus, the novel seems as a sharp critique of contemporary India, where the promise of progress coexists with persistent injustice, and where liberation often demands a radical, even destructive, reconfiguration of self and society.

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