

Subaltern Resistance: A Study of *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga

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Abstract

The present research paper aims to explore the growing subaltern consciousness and the resultant resistance registered by the protagonist Balram in the novel *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, while simultaneously positing that “subalternity” is a deeply rooted malaise of casteism and class consciousness, especially in the Indian context. The protagonist’s transformation from Munna to Balram Halwai to White Tiger and finally to Ashok Sharma is not just the portrayal of rising from the underclass, it’s rather a bildungsroman concomitant with growing subaltern consciousness inside him. The conception of representation of postcolonial subaltern is based on the deliberation that discursive focus can be shifted from hegemonic to the marginalized and the novel plays a crucial role in drawing attention towards the sufferings of the underprivileged arising out of the systematic and structural marginalization. Balram, though very much a part of the “rooster coup”, manages to break free from it, at the cost of him murdering his “master”. Consequently, he is referred to “white tiger”, symbolizing freedom and individuality.

Keywords: Subaltern, Oppression, Exploitation, Resistance.

“...only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed—hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters—can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature. It would, in fact, take a White Tiger. You are listening to the story of a social entrepreneur, sir.”(147)

The term “subaltern” was first introduced by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist in his *Prison Notebooks* to identify cultural hegemony that exclude and oust specific people and social groups from the socio-political and economic institutions of society, in order to deny their agency and voices in colonial politics. Since then the term has undergone vehement changes through the combined efforts of the writers such as Gayatri Spivak, Ranajith Guha and E.P Thompson who brought the concept of “subalternity” in the vanguard and enlarged the perspectives regarding what it means to be a subaltern, through their writings. Now the term connotes not just those who haven’t been given space to articulate their voice but also people who have been exploited and manipulated without their knowledge and consent, especially in terms of cultural domination. The novel *The White Tiger* represents both of these aspects. The landlords silence as well as exploit and manipulate the likes of Balram Halwai, the protagonist.

The White Tiger (2007) is a Man Booker Prize-winning, debut novel by Aravind Adiga. It is an epistolary novel with a retrospective narration by the protagonist Balram Halwai who comes from a penurious village but goes on to become an entrepreneur after killing his “master”. Through the character of Balram, the novel explores the issues related to poverty, caste, class, religion, and corruption prevalent in the Indian society and lends voice to the marginalized sections who are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation. Victoria Young quotes Adiga’s words, according to him the novel, “attempts to catch the voice of the man you meet as you travel through India – the voice of the colossal underclass.”(3) Therefore, the constant tussle between the oppression and the resultant subaltern resistance is put forth throughout the novel.

Furthermore, the conception of the representation of postcolonial subaltern is based on the deliberation that discursive focus can be shifted from hegemonic to the marginalized. The main stimulus behind this undertaking is to centralize the subaltern’s marginal position in society which is the outcome of systematic and structural marginalization in terms of social, political, and economic aspects. These concerns about the representation of the

marginalized group in national historiography prompted a group of Indian historians to form the subaltern studies group. The subaltern studies project initiated by progressive historians aims to revise and rewrite Indian historiography from the subaltern perspective. This is a highly revisionist project which is stated by Gayatri Spivak as “The most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the ‘subaltern’ (330).

Moreover, Gayatri Spivak in her 1988 seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” brings to notice the historical and ideological factors that obstruct the possibility of being heard for those who inhabit the periphery. According to Rosalind Morris, “It is a probing interrogation of what it means to have political subjectivity.” She presents a conscientious argument to locate the “subaltern” as the “subject” of history and not its object. In the same vein, Ranjit Guha in his work *A Subaltern Studies Reader*, has stated that, “Yet we propose to focus on this consciousness [subaltern] as our central theme because it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject” (11).

In *The White Tiger*, the protagonist’s transformation from Munna to Balram Halwai to White Tiger and finally to Ashok Sharma is not just the sketch for rising from underclass but also traces the growing subaltern consciousness inside him. It is a bildungsroman, concomitant with growing subaltern consciousness inside him. The representation of Balram’s status at the beginning of the novel is like subaltern destitute, but when he accumulates wealth, he becomes then like the landlord, a position which was ideologically and socially restricted for him. In the beginning, he is forced to give up schooling and he seems to meekly accept his grandmother’s decision of making him work at the tea shop. Despite working at the shop, he manages to land himself a job as a driver with one of the sons of the landlord and is faithful to them. But the growing circumstances compel him to change his attitude towards his hypocritical and unscrupulous masters. At the same time, his attitude towards his family members also undergoes a drastic change and he stops sending them money. Through Balram, the

plight of the marginalized is brought forth and a center stage is given to their sufferings.

His subaltern consciousness which was controlled by the ideology internalized by him due to his subjugation under hegemonic domination gets triggered when he faces the duresses at the landlord's son's house and he manages to haul himself out of the confinement. The deep-rooted internalization is brought forth through the symbol of "Lord Hanuman", who is praised for being a loyal servant by the villagers, "He is a shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion" (19). One of the many impacts of this internalization is that his grandmother agrees when the landlord tells her that Balram will take the blame for his master. She is not concerned about Balram's life getting ruined. Similarly, the villagers suffer the oppression at the hands of the landlords, and yet they don't stand against it because they have been told that they are to serve their masters and they have internalized this.

The underprivileged section gets relegated to the fringes and is exposed to various forms of exploitation by myriad forms of hegemonic forces. But unfortunately, they are either not aware of it or they are too scared to rise in protest against it. The suffocation and entrapment felt not just by Balram but also the others suffering under casteism and class distinction, who are oppressed, confined, and helpless, is brought forth through the analogy with "rooster coops". While addressing Chinese Premier Mr. Wen Jiabao in the letters, Balram writes, "Go to Old Delhi and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundred of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. 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) Deprivation, loneliness, alienation, subjugation, resignation, and neglect mark their lives and relegate them to the status of the subaltern who cannot speak.

Delhi is the place where Balram feels the great gap between rich and poor and between two castes: "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.” (54) All these social, political, and economical disparities gradually inculcate in Balram’s mind the spirit of revolt, resistance, and vengeance, which remained suppressed for some time in Balram’s unconscious mind. Balram becomes the mouthpiece of the oppression. Though the issues related to caste and religion trigger his consciousness, it is after moving into the city, Balram is confronted with many issues that affect his subaltern consciousness in varying degrees and he strives after a life that is free from poverty, bondage, exploitation, etc. Therefore, he dreams of becoming a successful entrepreneur shortly. The treatment he gets in his master’s house challenges his consciousness as a subaltern and triggers him to break free from the shackles of age-old slavery under the dominance of the upper-class elites. He also points out,

“Never before in human history have so few owed so much, to so many, Mr. Jiabao. 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.”(149)

Though, Balram tries to challenge this.

The subjugated or subaltern people are subject to suffering culturally, socially, politically, and professionally by the hand of the bourgeois class. They are incapable of raising their voice and powerless to resist the exploitation and humiliation entrusted to them. Though they remain inarticulate, they have a strong desire to come out of this mess in which their destiny has confined them. They have the instinct of rebellion buried deep within, but keep them checked, by remaining in the service of their masters; they become well acquainted with the lifestyle of their masters, their strengths, and their vulnerability and then wait for the opportunity to strike back at the ‘beast’ to get the ultimate goal of being counted. Balram informs the premier:

“Just because drivers and cooks in Delhi are reading Murder Weekly, it doesn’t mean that they are all about to slit their masters’ necks. Of course, they’d

like to. Of course, a billion servants are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses — and that’s why the government of India publishes this magazine and sells it on the streets for just four and a half rupees so that even the poor can buy it. you see, the murdered in the magazine is so mentally disturbed and sexually deranged that not one reader would want to be like him — and in the end, he always gets caught by some honest, hardworking police officer (ha!), or goes mad and hangs himself by a bed sheet after writing a sentimental letter to his mother or primary school teacher, or is chased, beaten, bugged, and garroted by the brother of the woman he has done in. So if your driver is busy flicking through the pages of Murder Weekly, relax. No danger to you. Quite the contrary. It’s when your driver starts to read about Gandhi and the Buddha that it’s time to wet your pants.” (72)

The domination of upper-class people is revealed when a child is killed by Pinky Madam while driving the car and the responsibility is being entrusted on Balram’s head by the stork family. The rich people are influential and powerful enough to escape punishments for their criminal deeds readily through the power of their position and money. On the other hand, the poor get punishment for any crime be it very minor or major whether they have done it or not. In the novel, Balram was also pressurized to surrender for a crime that he had never committed. Though the accident took place due to the negligence of Pinki, who was driving the car at that time still Balram was framed for it. He had no option but to take the blame on him because he was a poor man whose value of life and reputation has no existence in front of his masters’. They even keep his confession to blackmail him with it.

Similarly, in the village of Laxamgarh, the reign, oppression, and domination of four big guns – Buffalo, stork, wild boar, and raven are perceptible and the rest of the villagers depend on their exploitative mercy. Ram Bhawan Yadav in his essay, “Representing the Postcolonial Subaltern”, posits that it is important to understand that the names attributed to the landlords- the buffalo, the stork,

the wild boar, the raven have been represented as retaliation what they once attributed to the subaltern, as shorts of animals without the propensities in them. Their name has symbolic connotations. These animals treat the low caste people like Balram as animals or worse than them. They are just considered as objects that can be used: “Balram is what you’d hear if one day the drains and faucets in your house started talking.” (105)

Throughout the novel, Balram is referred to as The White Tiger which symbolizes power in East Asian cultures. It also stands as a symbol of 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 :

I watched him walk behind the bamboo bars. Black stripes and sunlit white fur flashed through the slits in the dark bamboo; it was like watching the slow-down reels of an old black-and-white film. He was walking in the same line, again and again - from one end of the bamboo bars to the other, then turning around and repeating it over, at exactly the same pace, like a thing under a spell. He was hypnotizing himself by walking like this - that was the only way he could tolerate this cage. Then the thing behind the bamboo bars stopped moving. It turned its face to my face. The tiger’s eyes met my eyes, like my master’s eyes have met mine so often in the mirror of the car. All at once, the tiger vanished. (237)

Though, Balram was himself a subaltern and very much a part of the “rooster coop”, still he manages to break it (through brutal and illegal) and hence is referred to as White Tiger. It was the only resistance that he could manage. Throughout the novel, the contrast between the two different worlds namely ‘dark’ and ‘light’ occurs just like the repeated pattern of black and white stripes on the coat of one of the rarest and most amazing species i.e white tiger. Adiga offers a space to the marginalized people whose voice often gets silenced. He presents the struggle and the ultimate resistance of the underprivileged class. Balram has been a member of the downtrodden class but he wants to feel like a master “just

for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute what it means not be a servant”. He also recalls his father’s words who said, “My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one of my mines- at least one should live like a man...All I wanted was a chance to be a man—and for that, one murder is enough.” (30)

Therefore, Balram’s battle represents the struggle of the downtrodden class for emancipation from social, economic, and cultural restrictions forcefully imposed on them by the ruling class. Balram’s resistance and the act of subverting the system are significant for the rise of the subalterns. Balram Halwai is the representative of the shifting mindset of the oppressed people who are no longer ready to live in the darkness of poverty but want to deconstruct the age-old class hierarchy and script a new narrative for themselves. He gave voice to the hushed silence of those silenced people and also hope that even ‘half baked’ can have light in their life. Thus the story of Balram expressed the optimism that a lot of low-class people will change and they will become the makers of their destiny. Towards the end, he claims, “The Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Mr. Ashok - who, for all his numerous virtues, was not much of a master - to be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace him.” (275) Not considering the moral aspect of killing his master and taking his name, Balram manages to take out not just himself but also one of his nephews from the shackles of the vicious cycle of oppression and exploitation.

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