

Substantiating Subalternity Via Animality: A Critical Study of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga is acutely cautious about the struggle of underprivileged people and their traumatized everyday life in India. He attacks the subaltern psyche of existing Indian society by using animal imagery. The novelist applies this technique to focus on the animal instinct of human beings and tries to persuade the readers to gain an understanding of the wide-ranging apprehensions of human identity. Literature is always construed as an artifact of socio-political and cultural realities. Fredric Jameson claims that it acts as a social contract between a writer and specific public. Accordingly, the present study examines the exactitude in the concept of animality versus human identity of the novel. It adopts qualitative approach, documentation method and descriptive technique of data-analysis. This study intends to analyze how far Adiga succeeds in his effort to exemplify the subaltern state of underprivileged Indians by adopting animality.

Key Words: Subalternity, psyche, human identity and animality.

INTRODUCTION

Subalternity, a thoughtful subject in Indian fictional world, always attempts to project the social evils of Indian society to the readers. Subaltern literature always deals with different themes such as oppression, marginalization and gender discrimination. Subalternity stands as a reality in the world since outrages against the marginalized are still on the rise. 'Subaltern', the term, stands for the people who are socially, politically, and geographically isolated from the power structure and are repeatedly suffering from different types of exploitations. So subalterns are said to be marginalized who are deprived of fundamental rights. As far as India is concerned, subaltern issues are ineradicable as these issues are inseparably tied with the problems of caste and class.

Caste, gender and class play a pivotal role in the construction of subalternity in India. Many Indian writers raised their voice about the social life of subalterns and placed subaltern issues at the centre of their novels. For example, Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and *Coolie*, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir*, and *Life and Triumphs of an Untouchable Family in India*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*, Bama's *Karukku* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* primarily focus on the subaltern issues. Aravind Adiga is also anxious about the subalternity of underclass people and their traumatized lives. His novel *The White Tiger* is indeed a bold attempt in which Adiga not only depicts the authentic story of a particular individual but also exhibits the overall realities of Indian subaltern existence. Adiga has this to say about his novel in an interview with the BBC:

The White Tiger is the story of a poor man in today's India, one of the many hundreds of millions who belong to the vast Indian underclass; people who live as labourers, as servants, as chauffeurs and who by and large do not get represented in Indian entertainment, in Indian films, in Indian books. My hero—or rather any protagonist—Balram Halwai is one of these faceless millions of Poor Indians ("Thomas").

The writer shows how Indian bureaucracy and administration join hands with the judiciary to defend the privileged whereas the underprivileged are destined to live in the same old despicable state. Representing the mounting societal

concerns of subalterns, Adiga attains significant global attention. He articulates his concerns about the social evils such as dowry system, second-rate education, tainted politics, and leftovers of the obsolete feudal system, besmirched medical practice and callous flesh trade. He focuses on the voice of subalterns through his protagonist Balram Halwai who tries to abolish discrimination between the rich and the poor. He desires to establish a society which will follow the principles of equality and justice. Being the son of a rickshaw puller, Balram designs his domain from his own limitations. He wants to escape from the wretched darkness of his village. He prefers to live like a man whose life is not meant for slavery. His voice is “intelligent, savagely funny and quite unforgettable—it is also a voice of anger and protest, and it is almost completely unsentimental. It is a voice that seeks out and understands the power of beauty” (Dasgupta 128). He aspires to run a school for the brave children of future India where he wishes to teach only facts. To him, the moral teachings are just leftovers, subsequently; he defends murder, malpractices and corruption.

The novelist adopts animal imagery as an appropriate method to symbolize the subaltern state of underprivileged Indians. Animal instincts in the characters of the novel make it an authentic zoo of animals. Adiga finds animality as a vehicle to designate his satire which is highly sensitive and intense. Balram describes his successful journey to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabo by writing letters. He writes the letters in the darkness of the night under the light of a chandelier. He says, “This is the only 150 square feet space in Bangalore with its own chandelier! But it’s still a hole in the wall, and I sit here the whole night” (7). This image is of a small animal hiding through the dark night. Here a rat like appearance is made by him. Throughout the narrative the writer talks of the filthiness in the river Ganga. While speaking about his mother’s funeral, Balram says, “...a pale skinned dog was crawling and sniffing through the petals and satin and charred bones” (17). Here the unholy moving of a dog in the holy river Ganga is a shocking revelation, but a reality.

Adiga condemns the feudal system of democratic India through his animal imagery. He labels the landlords after their appetite, for example, Stork, the landlord, holds the ownership of the river. He claims profit from the fish market and collects toll from boatmen for every trip. His brother Wild Boar claims the ownership of the agricultural land. Raven, the other landlord, has the ownership of grazing land, and the ownership of the road is claimed by Buffalo, who is the greediest among the four. He denounces the feudal system which plays a primary role in the exploitation of the underclass. He also addresses the inequality and economic instability of his village through his skillful portrayal i.e., men who work in the village tea shops look like human spiders. They are crawling under the table like human spiders for cleaning the floors. Balram is known as Munna from his birth onwards and he is not given any name by his family members. His school teacher later names him as Balram Halwai, to enroll his name in the school register. The visiting inspector of school education praises the small boy as the White Tiger, the rare species in the Indian Jungle. Nevertheless, the boy resigns from his studies and enters as a human spider into the local tea shop to pay off the debt of his family to a landlord.

This neglected hero desires to flee from the agonies thrown at him by his village Laxmangarh. He wishes to learn driving in order to lead a decent life like Vijay, a bus conductor of his village. Even after becoming the driver of a landlord’s son, there is something of the rebel lures his mind and he passionately desires to escape from incessant slavery. Adiga alleges that the dogs of the rich people are more precious than the underdogs in India. While handling the chains of the Pomeranian dogs of his master Stork, another servant yells at him: “Don’t pull the chain so hard! They’re worth more than you are!” (78). Here it is quite clear that subaltern survival in India is not even equivalent to animal.

Discrimination towards the underclass is a serious problem not only in rural India but also in big cities like Delhi. Balram is not allowed to enter into the mall of the capital city whereas the rich people avail easy entry. Here he is compelled to ask the following question: “Am I not a human being too?” (148). Balram felt like a fugitive when he was denied entry into the big malls. Balram hesitates to enter into the mall with his bright-coloured servant’s uniform and sandals. However, Balram enters into the mall through the rear entrance after getting dressed like his master. He changes his servant identity, but he cannot remove his appearance and complexion. When he recognizes his infected social status, he concludes that his master’s way of life is a perfect one. He asks himself in distress: “Why had my father never taught me to brush my teeth in milky foam? Why had he raised me to live like an animal” (151)?

Balram’s father believes that his son is more intelligent than any other boy at the village school. Even if he is forced to lead a worthless existence, he anticipates his son Balram to lead his life with dignity. Balram says, “...think of my father, Rickshaw-puller, he may have been—a human beast of burden—but my father was a man with a plan, I was his plan” (27). He envisages his son as a promising future, “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” (30). Balram’s father equates himself with the beast of burden and is furious about his subordinate status.

Adiga poignantly asserts the necessity of evading the outdated and foolish customs and beliefs of conventional society. He attacks the Hindu God Hanuman who appears as the religious symbol of enslavement. The slave God is known for his supreme dedication to his master Lord Rama. His servitude to his master Ram is a symbolic exemplification of the common man's commitment towards his master. He says, "...half man half monkey: this is Hanuman, everyone's favourite god in the Darkness" (19). The common men in the poor villages cannot escape from the clutches of feudal masters and politicians. The deep-seated slavish mentality is ingrained by the feudal lords so that the servant community remained loyal, humble and mute. To Balram, Hanuman is a subaltern whose worship stimulates subalternity among the poor. He sternly blames God Hanuman for his humbleness and loyalty towards his master Rama. He dislikes the slave God Hanuman because he continues to be a slave in his entire life.

The novelist alleges that such kind of slave god worship will threaten the liberation of the marginalized in the dark villages of India. His annoyance and protest against the unending slavery motivates him to escape from the long-standing bondage. Being a disciplined servant and driver in a landlord's mansion, Balram obeys his master's command but there is an inner core which forces the obedient servant to challenge the servitude. He is so eager to erase his browbeaten identity in the public that he soon frames a plan to murder his master Ashok. Without any delay he murders his master, grabs his money and migrates to the cyber city Bangalore where he emerges as Ashok Sharma. In no time he settles there as a successful entrepreneur. At this juncture the protagonist transpires himself as a predator in a jungle. By his criminality, he elevates himself to live like a man within the prevalent societal structure and he teaches the future generations to equip them suitably. He knows that the cold-blooded murder of his master is not a thing to get appreciation about. He argues against the atrocities of the rich people who treat their servants as animals. He seeks out a classless society where man will be treated like a man. Balram is not a rigid criminal by birth; however, his marginalized position enforces him to be a criminal and gives him confidence to commit murder.

The slavish mindset of the underclass never changes, even with education. The master contrives to sack his loyal servant from his driver post whereas the servant terminates his master forever. Even though Balram gets into the role of Ashok, he cannot completely erase his own identity. But he feels satisfied with his transformation because he will not be a servant not even for a day or for an hour or for a minute. He claims that 99.9% of working class Indians is tightly packed in the coop just like the roosters in the poultry market. They do not have enough space to move within the coop and just like the roosters they are not allowed to come out from the coop independently. Adiga concludes that if the underdogs develop the courage to break the coop, the wealthy and the powerful will face grave consequences. But the rich psychologically rivet the poor to remain in perennial servitude. Inviting every Indian to take new leaps through revolution, Adiga has sown the seeds of inspiration for creating a new India.

Balram claims that he broke the "Rooster Coop" (175) of his society to attain liberation. To him, the 'rooster coop syndrome' of democratic India never allows the poor to escape from bondage. Like the pitiable roosters, the hapless Indians are compelled to live under life-threatening servitude. Rebelliousness appears to them as a serious crime. So the poor fellows do not show any courage to come out of their enclosure. They merely thrive and struggle till death. Throughout his journey from poverty and humiliation to wealth and power, Balram realizes that the socio-psychological condition of the poor people remains the same. Whether it is a city or a village, there is no difference in the mentality and lifestyle of the underprivileged. In the dark villages, landlords and politicians subjugate the underprivileged whereas policemen, bureaucrats, industrialists and entrepreneurs possess immense power to tyrannize the underclass in the cities. Feudal settings are framed to strengthen the powerful landlords. The fate of the powerless individuals is decided by them. Adiga specifies that the working class in India is well-maintained inside the democratic Rooster Coop. The servant community in India is thoroughly conditioned to be reliable to their masters. This prevents them from doing any misdeeds. Thus Adiga's 'Rooster Coop' image is convincingly appropriate about the slavery of the poor and the oppressed.

Adiga adopts animal imagery to represent the predicament of underclass people in India and attempts to expose the gloomy side of India. By portraying the chaos of Indian jungle, he tries to create awareness about the rampant corruption and slavery found everywhere in India. Adiga intends to describe the connection between how animals live in the forest, and the way people live in India. By using the animal imagery, the novelist illustrates the working class people of India as caged animals whose life and death are determined by their masters. Balram starts his journey as an animal in the Rooster Coop, but he manages to escape from the coop and transforms as 'The White Tiger,' the rarest of animals in the Jungle. The title *The White Tiger* is ultimately revealing the overriding characteristics of the protagonist. He learns to live his life on his own terms and he is all set to take on the wilderness in which he hails. This novel is indeed a scathing attack of Adiga who lets the people of India know about the wide-ranging transformation through introspection.

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