

The Subaltern ‘Speaks’ in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*

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ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga’s Booker winning novel, *The White Tiger* has been one of the most discussed books of the past decade, not only because of its strangely powerful narrative of the rich-poor divide in modern India but also as the documentation of the pattern of this divide. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, is a driver from Bihar, an underdeveloped state of India. The novel is his story of the means, fair or foul, by which he goes beyond the destiny that is set for him by the impersonal forces of history, caste, class and culture. The novel is forceful and thought provoking at various places and critics have called it as a picture of the real India. The novel deals with issues like rural urban divide, poverty, callousness of the feudal set up and the caste system. Balram Halwai belongs to the lower class as well as a ‘low’ caste. Hence he belongs to the ‘subaltern’ category. His journey of life has the element of ‘rags to riches’ story. Rising from a lowly origin, he carves a niche for himself in the amoral universe of the ‘Darkness’. He works as a driver for Mr. Ashok and his wife Pinky. Halwai is able to see through the strands of social norms which conspire to maintain status quo of elitism and subalternity. He is a non-conformist at heart and hates the tag of an underdog. He wants to break the vicious circle of caste, class and poverty. He ultimately goes on to kill his employer, Mr. Ashok. He takes his money and starts a business in Bangalore and becomes ‘successful’- a white tiger from the Darkness. The novel,

thus, deals with ‘subalternity’ and its counter-narrative as against the established narrative of socio-economic development and modernist discourse of equality.

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‘The White Tiger’ (2008) is a Booker winning novel written by Aravind Adiga which deals mainly with the issue of the rich-poor divide in modern India, from an essentially subaltern point of view. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, narrates the story of his rise from a ‘half baked’ fellow from the ‘Darkness’ to being a ‘thinking man, an entrepreneur’ based in Bangalore, through letters to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. The novel is a bildungsroman tracing the development of Balram Halwai. It is his story of the means, fair or foul, by which he goes beyond the destiny that is set for him by the impersonal forces of history, caste, class and culture. Written from a first person point of view, the novel is epistolatory in form – addressed by the protagonist Balram Halwai to Chinese Premiere Wen Jiabao. It is also a type of a ‘bildungsroman’ where Balram Halwai’s journey of life is traced. At the beginning of his letter, Balram says:

“The Autobiography of a Half Baked Indian. That’s what I ought to call my life’s story.” [Adiga, 10]

Balram is of a lowly origin. He belongs to a ‘low’ caste as well as the low class. The fruits of democracy have not reached him and his ilk. Equality, for him, is a chimera. A loaded term ‘Subaltern’ may be appropriately used for Balram Halwai. Here it would be pertinent to

delve into the connotations of the word 'subaltern'. The term was first used by Antonio Gramsci and it :

“underlines a subordinate position in terms of class, gender, caste, race and culture.” [Das, 145]

Owing to the marginalized position in the society, the status of the subaltern class has always been vulnerable to misrepresentation. The question of authenticity of experience has remained central to the discourse of subaltern identity. In her path-breaking essay “Can the Subaltern Speak”, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes largely in respect of the gender subalternity :

“The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.” [Spivak]

But her arguments for gender subalternity hold ground for racial, caste and class subalternity as well. Commenting on Spivak’s theory of the muted subaltern, Leela Gandhi observes

"She queried 'Can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?' Through these questions Spivak places her squarely within the familiar and troublesome field of representation and 'representability'. How can the historian/investigator avoid the inevitable risk of presenting subaltern consciousness? Should the intellectual abstain from representation? Which intellectual is equipped to represent which subaltern class? Is there an 'unrepresentable subaltern class that can know and speak itself?' And finally, who- if any- are the true or representative subalterns of history, especially within the frame of reference provided by the imperialist project?" [Gandhi, 2]

This problematizes the issue of who speaks for the subaltern if he/ she is incapable of doing so. Through ‘The White Tiger’, Aravind Adiga seems to answer this question. The Guardian’s review notes the influences on Adiga and quotes him thus :

“It is not surprising then that the greatest literary influences on the book were three great African-American 20th-century novelists-Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Richard Wright. ‘They all wrote about race and class, while later black writers focus on just class. Ellison’s Invisible Man was extremely important to me. That book was disliked by white and blacks. My book too will cause widespread offence. Balram is my invisible man, made visible. This white tiger will break out of his cage.’ ” [Guardian, Saturday, October 18, 2008.]

The story he tells is from the point of view of Balram Halwai, a poor, low-caste, rickshaw-puller’s son- a subaltern. It is his sense of facts that strikes the readers. Balram’s arguments and beliefs are irreverent and powerful. He charges against the power structure that is responsible for the caste bias and class oppression. His early life in a small village, Laxmangarh in the ‘Darkness’ (apparently an unflattering name for the state of Bihar) is a documentation of the hardships that a ‘low’ caste, poor boy has to face. Balram’s narrative takes down the euphoria associated with liberalization, privatization and globalization in India. He launches a scathing critique of India’s development story in his narrative. The existence of ‘Darkness’ is a reality:

“I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and

water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies. Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The 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—the black river. Which black river am I talking of—which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it? Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness.” [Adiga,14-15]

The village, Laxmangarh, is dominated by the landlords – the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven, whose quarters are outside the village. They are the unofficial rulers of the village who exploit the villagers at their free will. As a result the village is a classic example of the income disparity that prevails in developing countries. Development and underdevelopment are shown as binary opposites. Ocean is contrasted with the river; the former symbolizes development while the latter symbolizes backwardness. The features of Darkness are dealt with at length.

“There is a small branch of the Ganga that flows just outside Laxmangarh; boats come down from the world outside, bringing supplies every Monday. There is one street in the village; a bright strip of sewage splits it into two. On either side of the ooze, a market: three more or less identical shops selling more or less identically adulterated and stale items of rice, cooking oil, kerosene, biscuits, cigarettes, and jaggery. At the end of the market is a tall, whitewashed,

conelike tower, with black intertwining snakes painted on all its sides—the temple. Inside, you will find an image of a saffron-colored creature, half man half monkey: this is Hanuman, everyone's favorite god in the Darkness. Do you know about Hanuman, sir? He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion.”[Adiga, 12-13]

Darkness is a space full of people who have no control over their lives. They are ‘half-baked’. Because of the lack of knowledge as well as skills, the downtrodden have no employability in a small village whose economic activity is hijacked by the oppressive elite. The vicious circle of poverty and unemployment is perpetuated by the landlords who form the de-facto government of the village. Economic vulnerability and powerlessness hurt the people of the lower class who get systematically marginalized. Migration is the only option for the men. They go to places like Dhanbad and Delhi to earn. This is where the divide between the urban and rural India become evident. While they get employment opportunities in urban areas and metropolitan cities, their status of subalternity sticks as an indispensable part of their identity. When they return, they have the money and the daunting task to deal with the women in their homes. Balram paints a grim picture of the women in the village. They, too, are a deprived lot. But somehow, they have an upper hand in the village household :

“A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets. The women were waiting for them. They hid behind the door, and as soon as the men walked in, they pounced, like wildcats on a slab of flesh. There was fighting and wailing and shrieking.” [Adiga, 26]

One can argue that the narrator's cynicism compels him to make a generalization regarding the women in the household. But the plight of the men is unquestionable. The narrator's father, Vikram Halwai, a rickshaw-puller, laments that he survived the city but could not survive the women of his home. His efforts to live a life of minimum respectability prove futile. Though he is honest and hard working, the impersonal forces of caste and class work in tandem to keep him grounded, or worse, buried in the mire of poverty and despair. Balram is his father's 'plan' for a better future. And he doesn't disappoint. He is uncommon, different from others in the 'Darkness'. He is 'The White Tiger' who emerges from a crowd of mediocrity to being an entrepreneur. This has been possible because Balram has learnt the way to rise. He has realized :

"...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 socio-economic and political reality of India in general and the Darkness in particular is touched upon by Balram in his narrative. He speaks of the poverty and ignorance of people there, the feudal system and the Naxal problem, issue of migration, lack of health care facilities, economic inequality and the Great Socialist's decade old misrule. Darkness remains a place from where he tries hard to get out and finally succeeds. Balram adopts fair means as well as foul in his dealings. He inhabits an amoral universe where his primary goal is to get rich; to move from darkness to light. The change of character is evident in Balram. From being a rustic boor, he graduates to being a crafty schemer.

“How I was corrupted from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness. All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him— and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent?” [Adiga, 197].

He believes that the exploitative system has pushed him to the brink. In search of his goal, he migrates to Dhanbad and works as a chauffeur to Mr. Ashok, the son of a feudal lord of Laxmangarh. Initially, he serves his master to the best of his abilities. But the critical moment comes when Mr. Ashok’s wife, Pinky Madam accidentally kills a child and his masters force him to take the blame for it. Balram is enraged at the heartlessness of the rich. He resorts to cheating his masters.

“How many ways are there for a driver to cheat his master? Over the next two weeks, I did things I am still ashamed to admit. I cheated my employer. I siphoned his petrol; I took his car to a corrupt mechanic who billed him for work that was not necessary; and three times, while driving back to Buckingham B, I picked up a paying customer. The strangest thing was that each time I looked at the cash I had made by cheating him, instead of guilt, what did I feel? Rage. The more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me.” (Adiga., 230).

He finally goes on to kill Mr. Ashok, loot his money and take his name as his new identity. He leaves Delhi for Bangalore and starts his own business there. Balram is not completely remorseless for the crime of killing his master. In fact, he says:

“ Why not? Am I not a part of all that is changing this country? Haven’t I succeeded in the struggle that every poor man here should be making. – the struggle not to take the lashes your father took, not to end up in a mound of indistinguishable bodies that will rot in the black mud of Mother Ganga? True there was the matter of murder – which is a wrong thing to do, no question about it. It has darkened my soul. All the skin-whitening creams sold in the markets of India won’t clean my hands.” [Adiga, 318]

The murder of his master is the only option that he sees to break out of the ‘Rooster Coop’ of darkness. Here Adiga seems to suggest that the subaltern can overcome exploitative set up by his/her own flash of genius. In Balram Halwai’s case, the flash of genius has obvious shades of grey.

“ In the discourse of the white tiger it is the voice of the subaltern that can be heard who, through his ‘silence’ has finally arrived at a position from where he can speak with no fear of repercussions...” (Narula, 181).

No collective action is advocated or implied. Balram Halwai is the exception to the norm. But he is the exception who speaks for himself. More importantly, he is historically and socially aware. He acts decisively, although in a manner which may not be considered righteous. The narrative, thus, is a tribute to the amoral and enterprising man who wants to give it back to the systemic forces of exploitation.

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