

Analyzing Foucault's Concept of Power as an Institution in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Power is the ability to hold and control others and regulate their actions. The intensive desire for power is inherent in human nature. The vigorous hunger for it is natural and common in humanity. The power relations subordinate the lives of human beings in various ways. All fights and conflicts in humanity are to gain power and dominate one over others. Hence, in the present scenario, the study of power relations is significant and relevant. The paper tries to explore the different types of power structures that operate in the society in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and tries to show how it influences human life. The present paper analyzes the text in the light of the Foucauldian theory of power as a system of institutions. Foucauldian theory of power interacts with institutions among groups and individuals. The fundamental idea emerging from the power theory of Foucault is that the power in action is the relations between the individual and the society. His notion is that power is something that a group of people or an institution possesses and that power is primarily concerned only with oppression and constraints. The careful and thorough reading of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* makes us to accept the presence of Foucault in terms of power. The study focuses on how power relations control the lives of human beings in the form of institutions. Foucault views that power is intrinsic in all relations. That is why all social relations can be seen as relations of power. Power relations can be witnessed in any social institution like family, court, government, etc.

Keywords: power, institution, availability, subordinate, control

The quest for power is innate and inborn in mankind. All struggles and disputes among nations bear witness to the pursuit of power over others. Hence, in the present scenario, the study of power relations is relevant. Through vigilant and careful strategic operations, everywhere people strive hard to gain power over others. The dominant people employ different strategies to overcome their subordinates. The recurrent and repeated disputes among nations are witnessing the desire for power over others. Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008), the winner of 2008 Man Booker Prize is a powerful critique of Indian democracy from a subaltern perspective. It juxtaposes the life of the working class in India against the lives of landlords who are empowered by the working class. The novel depicts drawbacks of Indian democracy and society in the form of maladministration, refusal of equality to people, the existence of injustice, and extensive corruption. This spoiled and rotten system has created new distinctions and classes in society.

Michel Foucault was a French historian and philosopher who studied the modern institutions and power relations within these institutions. He describes how power is exercised in modern institutions. Foucault thinks that power is the plain oppression of the powerless by the powerful, aiming to examine how it operates in day-to-day interactions between people and institutions. In the book *Power/Knowledge* Foucault observes, "Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain. Power is employed and exercised through the net like institutions; individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application". (Foucault 98). Power is an institutional system, a type of network of relations encircling the whole society, and not a mere relationship between the oppressed and

the oppressor. Power is a set of relations dispersed throughout the various institutions in the society.

Foucault says in his book *History and Sexuality*, Volume 1, "I am not referring to power with a capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. There are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration" (Foucault 38). For Foucault, the state is not mainly something that owns power, but a system of relations between individuals and institutions. Foucault examines how discipline, as a type of self-regulation encouraged by institutions, acts as a means of change, both the individual and the society. The institutions use various types of power enforcement, with specific mechanisms and techniques. Foucault shows how the hospital, the clinic, the prison, and the university share some of these disciplinary techniques and practices to exercise their power. His main aim was to highlight how the structures of institutions exercise their power in their modern forms. For Foucault, a set of strategies, procedures, and behaviors associated with a certain institution controls the individual's thinking and behavior.

In *The White Tiger*, the institutions like family, feudalism, marriage, slavery, education, government, police, court, religion, hospital, entrepreneurship, media, language, etc are powerfully used as a means of exercising power over docile masses. The thorough study of the novel ascertains the availability of Foucault in terms of power as an institution. It is visible in the epistolary renderings of Balram Halwai to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao about himself and

the social, political, and economic conditions of India. Power is successfully enforced in the novel through various institutions.

All mutual relations can be explained in terms of power. In the family, power operates in the hierarchical structure such as man-woman, husband-wife, and parent-children. Family is the most important primary element and the fundamental unit of society. It is the first social institution and it holds profound influence on its members. Family is the microcosm of the society where power relations operate subtly. In the family, parents have complete control over their children's activities. Balram is often observed by his grandmother Kusum, "One day Kusum found out about me and the fort. She followed me from our home to the pond with the stones and saw what I was doing. That night she told my father, 'He just stood there gaping at the fort – just the way his mother used to'" (41).

Throughout the novel family is presented as a controlling agent of the activities of its members. "There is only one thing,' Kishan said, 'Granny says you're a greedy pig. She wants to swear by all the gods in heaven that you won't forget her once you get rich.' 'I swear.' 'Pinch your neck and swear – you'll send every rupee you make every month back to Granny' (56). When Balram works in Dhanbad, his salary is taken away by his elder brother, Kishan, to send to Kusum. But once he moves away from the control of his family, when he moves to the city, he stops sending money to home. When charging the murder on Balram, Stork visits Balram's family and takes his family's consent. But Balram thinks that family impedes achieving success in life. He notices that only poor people are trapped in the control of the family. In the family, women are controlled by men. In the novel, Mr. Ashok realizes the importance of the family and

he says, “without family, a man is nothing” (188). The relationship between Stork and his sons is based on the elements of power. In Stork's family, he controls all the activities and absolute power over his children. The novel portrays how in family human relations are based on power.

Feudalism is the powerful institution that holds and controls the laborers. The ownership of the land and agriculture resulted in feudalism where the servants were exploited by the landlords. Landownership was the source of power in the olden days. Feudalism gave way to capitalism and labor became a commodity. In the novel four landlords namely, Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar, and Raven, represent the feudalist society that exists in the olden times. Adiga calls them by giving the names of animals to highlight the animal appetite they had. The Stork is the owner of the river flowing outside the village never forgets to take “a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village” (24). The Wild Boar, the brother of the Stork, owns good agricultural land in Laxmangarh. He gives work to the man who not only bows down to touch his feet, and touches the dust under his slippers, agrees to swallow his daily wages. No one has the right to speak against the low wages. The Raven owns the rocky hillside takes a cut from the goatherd for the grazing. If they do not have money, he will abuse them. The next landowner is known as the Buffalo is the greediest of all. He never forgets to take one-third from the earnings of the rickshaw-pullers for the use of the road. Every member of Balram's family work under the Stork as bonded laborers. They have taken the loan for the wedding from Stork. Balram, the intelligent student in the school has to leave the school and work for Stork “working in a tea shop. Smashing coals. Wiping tables” (38). All of them have to work as bonded laborers for the payment of the loan. When Balram goes to ask for a job as a driver, Stork gives him the job

because he is young and can exploit him for a long time. Stork says: Catch ‘em young, and you can keep ‘em for life. A driver in his forties, you get, what, twenty years of service, then his eyes fail. This fellow will last thirty, thirty-five years. His teeth are solid, he's got his hair, he's in good shape" (66). The novel depicts how the powerful institution called feudalism exercised its power on poor people in the olden days.

Marriage is a social institution where marital relations are determined by power. Marriage creates new relationships and helps in the formation of a family. Thus *The White Tiger* states: “Marriage is a good institution” (214). In the novel, the institution of marriage is used as a sovereign tool to control the men. “Marry him off!” the neighbors yelled. ‘That’s the only way to tame the wild ones like him!’ ‘Yes,’ Kusum said. ‘Yes, that's a good idea’ (84). Kusum always threatens Balram by telling him that she will arrange his marriage if he does not send her money. She thinks that marriage is the only solution to control her grandson Balram. But, Balram thinks that marriage is a hindrance to his development. The power of the husband over his wife is depicted in Stork's advice to his son Mr. Ashok, "You need to control that wife of yours better, son. The way we do it in the village” (180). The evil system called dowry and its effects are also well portrayed in the novel.

Adiga beautifully depicts how an institution like slavery is used as a means of exercising power over poor people. Balram makes the Chinese Premier understand that the servitude and the freedom less life of workers can see in Delhi. They are forced to work for others and having no freedom and their life is miserable. Balram says that: Every day millions wake up at dawn – stand in dirty, crowded buses – get off at their masters’ posh houses and then clean the floors,

wash the dishes, weed the garden, feed their children, press their feet – all for a pittance. I will never envy the rich of America or England, Mr. Jiabao: they have no servants there” (176). The majority of the Indians have dedicated their lives to the service of their masters. A minority possesses all the wealth of the nation. The master-servant relationship in India is very special and unique. Masters keep all detail of their servants. They have created a coop to keep their servants always under control. Balram states: “roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly...Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country” (173). The condition of the rickshaw pullers is also pathetic and heart-touching. The scene of the chicken market in old Delhi is also disgusting.

Foucault describes that knowledge is generated through power. He argues: “It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power” (Foucault 52). So education is a strong and influential institution that holds the power on its members. In the novel, Balram is often controlled by the school where he studied. School induces power through its ideology. A school is a hegemonic place where power is operated not only at the ideological level but also through physical punishments. Balram underwent physical and mental harassment in the school. So he says: “A school where you won’t be allowed to corrupt anyone’s head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi – nothing but the facts of life for these kids” (319). Balram’s father’s only long-cherished dream is to see his son educated and should not become like him. The only wish he has is: “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). He knew very well that it can be achieved only through education. But

Balram did not fulfill his father's dream and left the school and ended in becoming a servant at the landlords. Balram kept his education going by grasping every little information available to him. By eavesdropping and spying on others, Balram kept his process of learning alive. The operation of power is seen in its worst form in terms of the school teacher's stealing of the government aid, which is meant for the poor students in the form of mid-day meals and uniforms. The exploitation of the teacher by the government, leaving the teacher unpaid for six months is a mark of power dominance.

The government and the democracy are the powerful institutions used as a tool to control its citizens. The operation of power in the domain of 'Darkness' can be observed by Balram's comments on politicians and corruption during the time of elections. He remembers how when he was employed in the tea shop, the owner had sold everyone's vote to the candidate of the socialist party of Laxmangarh for a huge amount. He says:

There was an election coming up, and the tea shop owner had already sold us. He had sold our fingerprints – the inky fingerprints which the illiterate person makes on the ballot paper to indicate his vote. I had overheard this from a customer. This was supposed to be a close election; he had got a good price for each one of us from the Great Socialist's party" (97).

The candidate was a criminal with ninety-three crimes pending against him or murder, rape, grand larceny, gun smuggling, pimping, etc. The great Socialist had robbed one billion rupees from the darkness and deposited it in the Western bank. Anyhow it is sure that the great Socialist party wins the election in the end. But the four landlords decided to fight against the

Socialists. They formed their party and wrote outside the temple wall, "Do you want good roads, clean water, and good hospitals? Then vote out the Great Socialist Party" (98). But, the Great Socialist made a deal with the landlords and the Stork was nominated as the president of the Laxmangarh. True to Foucault's statement that power is more persuasive than oppression. Thus democracy has become a mockery and ministers are symbols of corruption. Elections are just a disturbing means of a nation's economy. The whole system is tuned with the power of the corrupted capitalist class.

Law and police is also a powerful institution that operates its immense power on subjects. Balram is the witness for the injustice when the fatal accident caused by drunken Pinky Madam, wife of his master Mr. Ashok Kumar is not reported. And later with the help of corrupted police, the case was charged against Balram. He says: "The police were totally rotten. If they see you without a seat belt, you'll have to bribe them a hundred rupees" (124). Balram escaped from his master's murder case by bribing the police officer. Balram's transformation from Balram to Mr. Ashok and his successful elopement from Delhi to Bangalore show the defect of the Indian legal system. It reveals that a murderer can easily protect himself by a fake identity regarding his profession and city. But Balram is not himself free from the corruption of dark India. When his driver hits a boy on a bicycle, he also acts without any morals and values. He deals with the case like a professional businessman by bribing the police officer to turn the case in his favor. Here Adiga intends to show the power of money in the Indian legal system and the relation between the corrupt beauracrates and the businessmen.

Religion is a powerful social institution that operates in favour of developing servitude among the poor. In the justification of slavery, religion plays an important role. The relation between master and servant is like a relation between maker and man. In the novel, Adiga portrays Hanuman as the symbol of servitude. Balram writes:

Inside you will find an image of a saffron-colored creature, half man half monkey: this is Hanuman, everyone's favourite 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 (19).

Rich and poor worship different gods. Hanuman is famous for his service to God Rama. So Hanuman is worshipped by the lower class and Rama is worshipped by the upper class in the same village. Hanuman is the servant of Rama and the lower caste Hindus are the servants of the upper caste Hindus in Laxmangarh. Adiga states: "What can a poor man's prayers mean to the 36,000,004 gods in comparison with those of rich?" (316). Adiga shows the role of religion in India where a Muslim has to change his identity, his name as Rampersad, and act as a Hindu because as a Muslim he cannot get a job in the Hindu landlords. Balram reveals that: "What a miserable life he's had, having to hide his religion, his name, just to get a job as a driver" (110). Religion as a powerful institution how it displays its dominant role is evident here.

The novel depicts how an institution like a hospital exercises its power on individuals and society. The worst form of power can be seen in the governmental hospital in Laxmangarh. The doctor collects money from his junior doctors, one-third of their salary to mark their fake

presence in a ledger and show the patients that they were treated by them. They earn money by working in some private hospitals. This worst practice makes Balram utter painfully: "The diseases of the poor can never get treated. My father had TB and it killed him" (237). It is the worst kind of power operation, misusing bureaucratic powers for the selfish purpose to breed corruption in society.

Entrepreneurship and business are strong economic institutions that operate their power to control the people. Balram states: "The Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time" (9). Balram elaborately explains to Wen Jiabao that how he became a successful entrepreneur by murdering his own master. By keen watching of the corrupted ways of his owners, he transformed into a murderer by killing mercilessly his morals and values. He says: "I'm not a sentimental man, Mr. Jiabao. Entrepreneurs can't afford to be. So I threw the thing out" (12). The novel beautifully portrays the journey of a country lad who transforms into a successful businessman.

Foucault's analysis of power as an institution equally applies to the media organization and it also dominates power over the people. Journalists adhere to impart the social truths which have the public interest. In the novel Adiga presents the unreliable nature of media i.e. All India Radio: "...and at 11:32 p.m. today, which was about ten minutes ago, when the lady on the All India Radio announced, 'Premier Jiabao is coming to Bangalore next week', I said that thing at once...Now you are visiting us this week, Your Excellency, aren't you? All India Radio is usually reliable in these matters" (3-4). Media has become one of the most widespread aspects. The knowledge of the world is transformed by people through media. With the help of mass

media, one can access a large source of information about the world. Balram writes about All India Radio: “This is the kind of news they feed us on All India Radio, night after night: and tomorrow at dawn it’ll be in the papers too” (291). It is a powerful weapon used to create public opinion and in the novel, All India Radio is associated with the government.

Language is also a social institution that operates its power on individuals. Language is an effective strategy to control and overpower others. Here, language acts as a means of subordination. The novel emphasizes the superiority of the English language. At the very beginning of the novel, it suggests the superiority of the English language. Balram writes to Jiabao: “Neither you nor I speak English but, there are some things that can be only said in English” (3). People in India respect those who speak English and consider they are superior. Throughout the novel, English is represented as the language of the masters and powerful.

Throughout the novel, Adiga beautifully picturizes how social, economic, and political institutions exercise their power on the powerless. The novel depicts the drawback of the Indian socio-economic and politico scenario and how it turns to be corrupted and rotten. Foucault focuses on how various institutions exert their power on groups and individuals and how the latter affirm their own identity to the effects of power. The Foucauldian interpretation of power as an institution seems to be closely in agreement in the novel *The White Tiger*.

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