

Emerging Trends of Narration in Postmodern Indian Fiction: A reading of Adiga's *White Tiger*

Dr. Aparna Nandha

Assistant Professor

Research and Post Graduate Department of English

Ethiraj College For Women, Chennai

Abstract:

One of the most striking features that grabs the reader's attention while reading Aravind Adiga's Booker prize-winning novel, *The White Tiger* is its perspective. The novel is narrated retrospectively from the viewpoint of Balram Halwai who has grown into an entrepreneur from humble beginnings. The story details the everyday life of Balram, a village boy who travels to Delhi to find work as a driver. The novel raises questions related to perceptions of servitude, morality, caste and class. By making Balram the narrator of the novel, the author shows the perspective of an individual aspiring for upward mobility on socio-political issues of the country. This paper attempts to deconstruct the novel and unearth the narrative trends that make it possible to depict a villainous character in a positive light. Through an analysis of the narrative, the paper not only attempts to comment on issues related to class, caste, servitude and morality as discussed in the novel but also discuss the postmodern narrative style in *The White Tiger*. This paper through a study of the novel attempts to touch upon the latest trends in fiction writing and also discuss the effects of globalisation and its repercussions in the literary arena. This paper could open up avenues for thought in areas relating to narrative theory and could be constructive in further research.

Keywords: *The White Tiger*, narrative trends, postmodern, globalisation.

White Tiger tells an unconventional story of a young man's progression in life through acts of cunning and villainy. The story narrates the growth of an intelligent young boy, Balram Halwai who is pulled out of school to work in a tea stall to becoming an entrepreneur who owns a taxi service. The novel is written in the form of a seven part letter Halwai writes to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. In the letter, Balram details how the reality of his country is vastly different from how it is represented in the international forefront. Balram's letter explores the divide between how things are perceived by the

privileged section of people who have the agency and power to narrate their own tales and the actual ground reality of life lived by the subaltern people in the country. The novel by giving agency to a subaltern to write the story of his own life explores concepts such as class, caste, servitude and morality from the perspective of the underprivileged. This paper intends to read the techniques of narration used in the novel to explore the subjects discussed.

The novel opens with the format of a letter addressed to Mr Premier, Wen Jiabao who is due to visit India shortly to meet with the entrepreneurs of Bangalore and learn their success stories. The letter Balram writes is a response to Jiabao's visit for it details the story of his success. He writes, "If anyone knows the truth about Bangalore, it's *me*." (Adiga 4). The narrative thereby not only has a claim to truth but it is also an attempt to establish an agency for the millions who do not speak for themselves. Balram dismisses the story of India as told by the Prime Minister as a false cover for the complicated, corrupt and sad social reality of the country. He narrates an episode where his former master refers to him and all the uneducated people in the country as "half-baked" arguing "*That's* the whole tragedy of this country." (Adiga 7). Balram, however, goes on to argue that people are "half-baked" because the country's poverty and personal circumstances did not allow them to complete their education. He writes,

Me and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you'll find an old museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks..., bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half hour before falling asleep—all those ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (Adiga 8)

While Balram acknowledges the truth in Mr Ashok's argument, he claims that "fully formed fellows" do nothing either, for they work white-collared jobs and take orders from men for the rest of their lives. Balram says that entrepreneurs are made from "half-baked" people.

He goes back to the story of how he came to Bangalore. He cites a notice published by the department of police seeking help from the civilians in locating him for being a suspect in the murder of Mr Ashok, his ex-boss. What is interesting about this notice is that thousands of young people could fit into the description given by the police and the photo of Balram they had published was unclear suggesting that his identity is vague and easily replicable in the government records. His identity becomes noticeable and important only after he had murdered a rich man—a man of importance. Balram’s story implies that he is a citizen with no actual rights or duties. Even his right to the franchise is exercised by other people working for corrupt politicians in his namesake. He writes,

Here's a little souvenir of your Indian visit to keep with you. Balram Halwai is a vanished man, a fugitive, someone whose whereabouts are unknown to the police, right?

Ha!

The police know exactly where to find me. They will find me dutifully voting on election day at the voting booth in the school compound in Laxmangarh in Gaya District, as I have done in every general, state, and local election since I turned eighteen.

I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth.
(Adiga 60)

Thus Balram’s narrative weaves a critique of the Government’s disinterest in its citizens. His narrative categorises the world into two—the light and darkness. B. H Goh in his article that studies diasporic identity and its connection to narrating India writes,

“Darkness” is not merely an impressionistic term, but is actually used as a symbol of India’s social condition, whose malignity manifests itself in individual characters as a moral darkness, a propensity for cruelty and betrayal that appears (in the individual) to be almost essentialist in its inexplicability. (333)

Balram's categorisation of light and dark is, however, different. In Bangalore, Balram claims to be in the light. His life is much more comfortable and economically stable. However back home, he was in the dark. He says that he was initially called "Munna" which means boy in the vernacular. His own people did not bother to give him a name. It was only his class teacher who named him Balram. In the dark, he had no visibility. He could easily become one among the crowd. In the darkness, Balram says, the water buffalo was more important than the people for it gave milk and more milk meant more money. So it was the water buffalo who used to get the best food in the family. So Balram's categorization of the light and dark is more based on visibility, individualism and economic self-sufficiency. Mendes who writes about the narration of exotic dark India in *White Tiger* says, "The India of Light is that of wealth, technology and knowledge, while the India of Darkness (where the majority of Indians live) is that of misery, destitution and illiteracy." (277). Balram in the novel writes,

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 10)

In the darkness, class and caste contributes as the markers of identity. Balram's narration is against the constructed binary of the high and low in the social hierarchy. His aspirations to traverse the boundary and cross from low to the high is what makes him explore methods of violence and cunning. He is convinced that he can never progress in the social order by being faithful. The social order was constructed in such a way that one had to stay in the same caste/class that one is born into. Balram once asks his fellow driver what

happens when they become old and is no longer able to earn their living. To this the other driver replies,

"Well," he said, "a driver is good till he's fifty or fifty-five. Then the eyes go bad and they kick you out, right? That's thirty years from now, Country-Mouse. If you save from today, you'll make enough to buy a small home in some slum. If you've been a bit smarter and made a little extra on the side, then you'll have enough to put your son in a good school. He can learn English, he can go to university. That's the best-case scenario. A house in a slum, a kid in college." (Adiga 119)

The idea that his life is never going to take a good turn hits Balram. Beliefs of morality and righteousness that are imparted into young minds through tales and cultural rituals now look like traps that facilitated the establishment and continuance of a said social hierarchy. Balram writes, "...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 13).

In Balram's narrative, he predicts a shift in the world order and says that "the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the White skinned man has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse" (Adiga 4). With the advancement of technology and globalisation, he presumes that the roles have reversed and the future of the world lies with the east. He criticises the education system for inculcating moral values which subject one to self-scrutiny and prevent them from progressing in life. This is a typical example of the Foucauldian "panopticon". Foucault in his works has discoursed elaborated on how power and knowledge are intricately linked. His cardinal thesis is that knowledge is constructed in such a way as to feed into the structures of power—coercive and forceful. What Balram does in the novel is precisely break out of the structure of power and make a life for himself. Balram keeps repeating to himself a line from a poem that a book seller had once read to him, "*You were looking for the key for years/But the door was always open!*" (Adiga 151). The repetition of this line serves to enforce the idea that he should not become the object of his own principle.

Balram's narration makes it a point to show a particular incident from both the master's perspective and the servant's perspective. In the part of the story where Balram finds work as a second driver in the Stork's household, he feels overjoyed to have a room to stay in even though it meant he had to share it with the first driver. But when one day Mr. Ashok visits him and feels sorry for the condition of the room he had to stay in, Balram, for the first time, looks around him through the eyes of his master. What he sees then is vastly different from what he saw as a servant. Balram writes, "Until then I had never noticed how the paint on the ceiling was peeling off in large flakes, and how there were spiderwebs in every corner. I had been so happy in this room until now." (Adiga 47). Until then, Balram was trained to feel grateful for the little things he received from his master. He was so convinced that he had no rights that it felt like a mistake to even ask for basic amenities to his master.

The story that Balram sets against the oft represented tales of progress and equality in the country is a tale of grave mistakes, opportunism and revolt. It speaks about a non-egalitarian social order where the rich become richer and poor poorer. On the subject of master-servant relationship, Sawhney writes commenting on Aravind Adiga's novel,

The servant-master system implies two things: One is that the servants are far poorer than the rich—a servant has no possibility of ever catching up to the master. And secondly, he has access to the master—the master's money, the master's physical person. Yet crime rates in India are very low. Even though the middle class—who often have three or four servants—are paranoid about crime, the reality is a master getting killed by his servant is rare.... You need two things [for crime to occur]—a divide and a conscious ideology of resentment. We don't have resentment in India. The poor just assume that the rich are a fact of life.... But I think we're seeing what I believe is a classbased resentment for the first time. (2008).

Adiga points out that people get used to the discrimination and injustice prevalent in the society to the point that it is seen as a normal everyday reality. Sebastian who comments on the poor-rich divide as narrated in *The White Tiger* writes, "Social discontent and violence has been on the rise. What Adiga highlights is the ever widening gap between the rich and the poor and the economic system that lets a small minority to prosper at the expense of the

majority.” (230) Balram’s experiences of feeling anxious despite committing no crime, makes the reader rethink notions of class and the parameters it sets around the social life of people. Balram’s thought of entering a mall is accompanied by a sense of anxiety because it is not one of the places that a man from his social-class frequents. Even aspiring to frequent the places that people of the upper strata frequent is considered a violation of the long established social hierarchy.

The story when narrated in retrospect has the advantage of foretelling a happy ending and thereby justifying the ways taken by Balram to advance in life. The murder of Mr. Ashok looks justifiable from his perspective because that was the only way out of the poverty and misery for Balram. The metaphor that Balram employs is that of a rooster coop.

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. 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. (Adiga 102)

Balram’s narrative justifies the murder he committed as an act of survival. He did not want to follow the other chickens to a helpless death. So he chooses violence over his own miserable death. Sebastian writes, “He decides to ape his masters to become a bigbellied man, by resorting to corrupt ways he has learnt through bribery, crime, disregarding all civilized ways of life. His violent bid for freedom is shocking.” (236). His violence is shocking but it is also his only redemption.

Adiga shows how a man from the lower strata is pushed to the point of resorting to violence. On asked how the author was inspired to tell the tale from Balram's perspective, Adiga says,

Balram Halwai is a composite of various men I've met when traveling through India. I spend a lot of my time loitering about train stations, or bus stands, or servants' quarters and slums, and I listen and talk to the people around me. There is a kind of continuous murmur or growl beneath middleclass life in India, and this noise never gets recorded, Balram is what you'd hear if one day the drain and faucets in your house started talking (Interview with the author.htm).

Thus the story narrated as a letter to a third person reveals more about Balram's own country, his life situations, the choices, mistakes and the ways of survival in the 'darkness'. By giving voice to the subaltern Adiga succeeds in bringing to light that which both art and texts of history are reluctant to discuss.

References:

1. Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New York: Free Press. 2008.pdf.
2. ... 2008. *The Sunday Times of India*, New Delhi: Oct. 19.
3. Cristina Mendes, Ana. "Exciting tales of exotic dark India: Aravind Adiga's *The white tiger*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 45.2 (2010): 275-293.
4. Goh, Robbie BH. "Narrating "dark" India in *Londonstani* and *The White Tiger*: Sustaining identity in the diaspora." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 46.2 (2011): 327-344.
5. Sawhney, Hirish. (2008). "India: A View from Below." September. <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/09/express/india-a-view-from-below> Downloaded on 01/11/2008.
6. Sebastian, A. J. "Poor-Rich Divide in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*." *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 1.2 (2009): 229-245.
7. Singh, Khrishna. "Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: The Voice of Underclass-A Postcolonial Dialectics." *Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies* 1.2 (2010).