

Language As a Representation of Social Class: A study based on Adiga's character Balram

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Abstract

The language used by Balram Halwai, the narrator of the novel *The White Tiger*, represents his poor past, comfortable present and an even richer future. This questions the ability of the class system to create homogeneous identities. Nakul Krishna, writing for the British magazine *New Statesman* says about the narrative voice, 'It is simultaneously able to convey the seemingly congenial servility of the language of the rural poor as well as its potential for knowing subversion.' M.Q Khan in his essay, "The White Tiger: A Critique" says, 'Halwai's voice sounds like a curious mix of an American teen and a middle-aged Indian essayist.' In this research paper, I attempt to study how the background of Balram's development and his aspirations in life impact his language. There is also the question of whether the English educated author Aravind Adiga is able to provide a believable representation of the language of the newly rich. Historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam says, 'His[Balram's] sentences are mostly short and crudely constructed, apparently a reflection of the fact that we're dealing with a member of the "subaltern" classes....This is a posh English-educated voice trying to talk dirty, without being able to pull it off.' However, Subrahmanyam's views have been strongly criticised by Pankaj Mishra. Language as a means to transcend one's social class as depicted by G.B Shaw in *Pygmalion*, language as a representation of one's class of origin, and language as a result of life experiences are some of the concepts I would like to consider.

Keywords: Aspiration, Subaltern, Language, Development, Class.

Balram's language in *The White Tiger* shows his poor past, comfortable present and even richer future. Social class is determined by the power, wealth and prestige of a person. India being a caste-ridden society, one's caste often determines how much power, wealth and prestige one can acquire. The language spoken by various social classes tend to differ. Even when they speak the same language, say English, there will be grammatical, phonetical and phonological differences. In India, there are caste dialects for the same languages which makes it possible to differentiate between members of various castes by the way they speak.

The research conducted by William Nabov, an American linguist, found that social aspirations influence speech patterns. When people wish to change their socio-economical class, they tend to adjust their speech to sound like the people belonging to the class to which they are aspiring. Sociolinguistics studies the influence of various aspects of society on the use of language. While adherence to a particular style of speech categorises individuals into specific

classes, learning a new language or a new way of using a language often helps individuals break from the social classes they belong to. This can work up or down the society. For instance, someone belonging to an upper class but wishing to attain a middle class profession might adapt the language of the middle class which would help the person in attaining the style of life he/she desires. Multilingualism often determines the social and cultural identity of a person. Wardhaugh and Fuller in *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* point out that multilingualism has become an increasingly prestigious part of urban cultures across the world.

The four powerful high caste characters are nicknamed using animal names as they show the attributes of those animals in their character, attitudes and actions. This reflects the rich Indian culture of folklores and fables in which animals and forces of nature are anthropomorphized. Of the four, Buffalo, a landlord was the greediest of all. The Stork owned the river, the wild boar owned all the fertile agricultural land and the raven owned the worst land, the dry rocky hillside that surrounded the fort. Thus the four animals together controlled the whole village. Every natural resource of the village was owned by one of the four men and they manipulated the system under which the villagers worked to make their own lives more luxurious. The villagers are unable to escape their powerful clutches and no one survived if they rebelled. This shows the dark reality of Indian villages even after the Independence of the country from foreign powers. For the poor rural population, there is still no Independence.

‘If the Indian village is paradise, then the school is paradise within the paradise’ (p-32). Balram’s ironical statement refers to the fiasco of midday meal and government funded uniforms for children. The schoolmaster pockets the money for the midday meal and instead of distributing the uniform among the children sells the whole consignment. No one blames the schoolmaster. He is almost admired for his dexterity in managing his corruptive actions without getting caught.

Balram gives a very interesting description of the norms of an Indian marriage to Mr Jiabo. Unfortunately, Balram’s information is true even in the context of contemporary India. The dowry system and the tradition of grand rituals connected with the marriage ceremony push a man into the valley of debt. Balram is a victim of this tradition as his family went far deep in debt after the marriage of his cousin. When the first cousin marries, Balram’s big brother is taken out of school, after the marriage of the second cousin, Balram is forced to start working at a tea stall. This is both humiliating and upsetting to Balram as he was a brilliant student which set him apart from his peers. The marriage becomes a tragedy for every member of the family and the whole family has to surrender their lives to the landlords, toiling all their lives trying to pay the debt.

‘The coal breaker’ (p-36) When Balram’s old schoolmates watch him break coal, they laugh at him. He was praised by the school inspector as a white tiger, a creature that comes along only once in a generation. The boys say that the rare creature that Balram is now is a coal breaker. Here the two opposing ideas of Balram’s reality and his dream are juxtaposed. ‘Stories of rottenness and corruption are always the best stories, aren’t they?’ (p-50) Here Balram is referring to the corruption connected with government hospitals. Government doctors bribe their

higher officials and work in better paying private institutions with better facilities. This means the although in record they are treating and curing the poor suffering people in villages, in reality, the rural hospitals are without doctors and the patient die without anyone to offer them medicine or treatment.

‘All of it came from the coal pits’(p-53) Balram’s comment is about the richness of the city of Dhanbad. In the novel we find that businessmen bribe politicians with large sums of money so that they can illegally exploit the natural resources of the country and even avoid paying tax. With their power and money they find means to make more power and more money. They make diamonds from the black money of coal mines.

‘Fires that had been burning continuously for a hundred years’. This is another reference to the city of Dhanbad where the coal mines went for miles and miles outside the town. The fires mentioned are underground fires. Symbolically, this fire is the burning in the village minds and smoke come out in the form of agitations. However, the upper class people suppress these communities with their power so that the villagers have no means of expressing the emotions that has been burning inside them for years.

Balram depicts experiences at a typical Indian tea shop. Young men waste their type idling away, reading newspaper or talking with pictures of actors in their rooms. They pass their time in an aimless way without aspirations or ambitions.

Balram’s rhetorical questions make us to think about the caste system in India. ‘Why did I grow up breaking coals , and wiping tables, instead of eating gulabjamun and sweet pastries when and where I chose to?’ (p-63). This points out that even though people are constrained by their caste and struggles to break out of the chains of discrimination, there are inadvertent occurrences when a person breaks out of their caste and still wouldn’t have done anything heroic as the situation has thrown him/her into an even worse position. It is as if even the security of one’s own caste is not guaranteed.

‘Like the eunuchs discussing the kam sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh’. This is true not just in Balram’s place, but in almost every part of India. During election time, there will be lively discussions about the elections everywhere. But the people are unable to initiate any change by choosing the people they have faith in as their leaders. The less educated poor people are not allowed to cast their own votes. People such as employers sell the votes of their labourers to political parties and the politicians cast those votes. Balram pokes fun at the democracy in India by saying, ‘I am India’s most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth’.

After the murder of Mr Ashok, Balram goes to Bangalore. He hides in the light while the police search in the darkness, the villages. This is his secret for a successful escape.

Whenever he drove Mr Ashok around the city, he watched the beggars and the rishawpullers on the road. This kept him aware of the condition of his father. Although he sat inside the car driving, his mind was on the road.

The rich man of village looks like a premium ‘cotton pillow, white and soft and blank’, a representative of the class (26), but the poor rishaw puller is like a ‘knotted rope’ with cuts and nicks and scars’. ‘The story of a poor man’s life is written on his body with a sharp pen.’(27) Every rishaw puller is ‘a human beast of burden’ and it is their perpetual identity which displays the deprived condition of life.

Balram pronounces the word ‘mall’ like ‘maal’ and the word ‘pizza’ like ‘pijja’. This shows the lack of proper education in his childhood. Balram becomes aware of his paan-stained teeth and starts brushing them. As he vigorously brushes and spits out, he realizes that it isn’t that easy to spit out one’s past. When he moves to Delhi, he tries to adjust to the new life. But he finds that where ever he goes, he carries his past with him and he is neither here nor there. He struggles to fit in with the Delhi culture. He is pleased when he smells dung or a buffalo. He is seeking for village in the city. However, he couldn’t return to his village, as there was nothing for him in the village. The city life had already corrupted him. In the group of other drivers Balram used similar language which shows him adapting his ways to their social group and society. Balram accepted the language of expression of his social peers, but was alienated from them by the difference in thinking.

As time goes by, Balram recognizes the beauty of light in Delhi. He stops being a slave and actively seeks freedom. He wants the golden haired woman for him and spends seven thousand sweet rupees for twenty minutes with her! He visits the zoo and finds that the lion and the lioness are sitting apart from each other without communicating, just like a true city couple. He gets to the cage of the white tiger. Th tiger was incessantly walking to and fro in his cage. Balram thinks that the tiger is trying to hypnotise himself. That is the only way in which he could tolerate the cage. It is similar to how Balram puts up with his mundane life by following the same schedule. ‘The tiger’s eyes met my eyes’(p-277) Balram is fascinated by tiger’s walking and his eyes but he doesn’t want this cage around him .He wants to break the rooster coop. At that moment hesays aloud, ‘I can’t live the rest of my life in the cage’(p-278).

Balram acts as the cultural ambassador of India to the Chinese Primier. He emphasizes the importance of yoga and says that it must be compulsory in Chinese schools. Yoga helps the entrepreneur to focus on his work and get away from the stress of the day.

The third day after the murder of his employer, Balram is at the Hyderabad train station. There was a poster on the wall with Balram’s picture that the police force in search of the murderer had pasted to make the public aware of the matter. But the picture was very unclear that it could have been anyone. As he reads the poster, a man asks him what is written on the poster. Hearing the accent of the man, Balram feels sure that he is from the darkness.

Balram compares his situation with corrupt parliamentarians and politicians. They are extraordinary men who can kill and move on, as if nothing has happened. But Balram is different from them. It took him four weeks in Bangalore to settle his nerves. Then he started his own business, running cab service for call centres. He has become like Mr Ashok, greasing the hands of police for the smooth functioning of his business. Regarding his interactions with the police he says that the moment you show cash, everyone knows your language.

He turns out to be like his old master in a lot of his dealings. For instance, one of his drivers due to over speed, accidentally hits and kills a poor boy. Since the family of the boy is poor and haveno influence, he very easily saves his reputation. He bribes the police and not even an FIR is filed. He runs the business as if nothing has happened. But what makes him different is that, he insists to giving some money in compensation to the dead boy's family. As they are extremely poor, despite their moral indignation, they accept the sum. But this could also be seen as an act of humiliation –putting a price on a loved one's life. He learns to adapt to the city life and proceeds to success with a corrupt soul.

‘All I wanted was the chance to be a man –and for that ,one murder was enough’(p-319).Adiga never shows regret for his crime. He feels that it was a necessary action. In fact, his only nightmare is that one day, he might wake up and find out that he hasn't killed his boss and he is still a slave.

‘After three or four years in real estate , I think I might sell everything,take the money and start a school –an English language school –for poor children in Banglore. A school where you won't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi-nothing but facts of life for these kids .A school full of white tigers, unleashed on Banglore!’ Here Balram echoes the words of Mr Thomas Gradgrind in Dickens' novel *Hard Times*.Gradgrind says,'Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them.'

Balram assumes that he will never be caught. He has already broken the rooster coop. Now even if they catch him and put him in jail, he says that he would neversay that he made a mistake that night in Delhi when he slit his master's throat. Balram is a representative of the darkness full of people who yearn to break out of the rooster coop. All his statements show his rebellion, not just on his behalf, but for all that he represents. Only a white tiger can do it.

In G.B.Shaw's Pygmalion Eliza Doolittle transforms from a cockney speaking Covent Garden flower girl in to awoman as poised and well-spoken as a duchess.Balram undergoes a similar transformation as he changes his lifestyle and language to suit those of an entrepreneur. Balram forgets his family and is very aggressive towards his nephew like many of the masters he has experienced. The novelist is able to picture Balram from many points of view with skillful use of language.

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