



The Quintessential – Vol. 01, Issue 01, Jan-Mar 2023. ISSN-XXX-XXX
Web: www.thequintessential.co.in

Post modern Reading of Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger

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ABSTRACT

Postmodernism, mainly depicts the transition of society and culture from its 'modern' environments to the highly complicated 'post-modern' period of transnationality, hyperreality, intertextuality, simulacrum and deconstruction. From a world where Nietzsche had already announced the death of God, Postmodernism announces the death of the subject and structured discourse. Such disseminating features of Postmodernism can therefore incite its description as a movement which has a unifying philosophy of individualism, dislocation of the psyche, discredited Marxism and such strategic-rhetorical practices resulting into the reinterpretation of history, identity and epistemology.

Postmodernism and social theory has always been an unbreakable connection. As a matter of fact, Postmodernist literature itself is a consequence of the deeply imbibed socio-historical struggle of the modern intellectual to justify himself in a hypocritical society. Such equation is shared between Literature and Society that this eventually breeds a complex intellectual discourse rich with ideas, ideologies and concepts. All complicated Postmodernist discourses of New Historicism, Oriental Studies and Cosmopolitanism in some way discuss the relationship between texts and reality. They critique the society in theory thereby giving vent to frustrations while also letting the world know of its deep rooted problems. This paper tries to connect literature with society and attempts to bring to light the contemporary social problems arising as a consequence of growing capitalism, consumerism and class divide with the help of The White Tiger.

Keywords: Hyperreality, Consumerism, Disillusionment, Otherness, Maximalism, Cosmopolitanism, triumphalism, multiculturalism, Metamodernism

Social activities like scientific advance, industrialism, capitalism, urbanism, and bureaucracy are hugely linked and are characteristics of the Modern intellectual trends of the society. Despite their early beginnings, these aspects are the contributing factors of contemporary production of literature which discusses a society filled with individualistic ideas and urban environments. The post-industrial society in literature and otherwise is characteristic of consumerist and cosmopolitan ideologies, isolated



and stressed environments and alienation and crisis; all of which are found galore in *The White Tiger*.

It is a notion of no surprise then, that like most things, Literature produced today is also a factory product of those consumerist images that rapidly flow in the information overloaded world of mass media and marketing. It is interesting to note that many international films, novels and other pieces of art today are centred on exotic images of the East or the less developed Postcolonial regions of the world. The phenomenon is more frequent because writers and books who repetitively speak of their charms and their marginalisation are the ones who gain public limelight and become bestselling products of consumption. It discusses the marginalisation of the have-nots and the racially 'inferior'.

Literature today therefore, is not simply a collection of images and writings that produce a concurrent change in the society, but instead, literature is a piece of rapidly flowing influx of images and ideas that we, as consumers, prefer to read. As put by Struken and Cartwright, when we chose what we aim to acquire, we also end up achieving that in part. If literature shows Postcolonial countries like India as having filled with marginalisation and social evils that need to be rectified, there is a chance that we might end up actually rectifying some parts of our society.

Negative side aside, such promotion of ideas also has in some way helped these developing countries like India to establish an international base and work on its development in the right manner. It has given voice to the marginalised proletariat and the racially abused thereby declaring the influence and importance of Literature on Society once again.

The White Tiger is the story of Balram Halwai, an intelligent anti-hero whose ambition drove him to become a subjugator of his miseries and an expounder of harsh realities. The book takes the classic epistolary form and makes it a postmodern, cosmopolitan exploration of communication across cultural boundaries as the narrator Balram recounts the events of his life and tells them to the Premier of China, Mr. Jiabao. Balram, in his typical guileless sarcastic tone, tells how his impoverished beginnings led him to become a successful entrepreneur mainly by committing the murder of his master Ashok. The next series of episodes in the letter detail the story of Balram who comes

from the tiny village of Laxmangarh that is oppressed by the family of Mr. Ashok. As the story proceeds, we see how Balram moves from Laxmangarh to Dhanbad and then eventually to Gurgaon where he kills his employer to flee to Bangalore with a bag of stolen money. As a criminal, Balram is never identified by the law and he eventually takes on to become a good businessman of a taxi chain in the metropolitan city of Bangalore.

To have a detailed account of the story would benefit in understanding the themes of capitalist suppression and cultural dominance in the novel. The story begins Balram's tale and we learn he has been living in the village of Laxmangarh of Uttar Pradesh. Born in a low-caste, impoverished Halwai family, Balram's mother dies when he was little and he is ignored by the rest of his family afterwards. Being a brilliant young boy he excels in school but, to the disappointment of his father, Balram is taken out of school soon because of financial crisis his family has to face as a result of the wedding of his sister. Balram's father lives in the city as a rickshaw puller. The matriarch of the family is Balram's grandmother, Kusum who often tends to use her cunning in scratching money out of his pockets later in the book. Balram's realisation of his inferior social position happens as he is employed as a driver in the family of the landlords of Laxmangarh, viz, the Raven, the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Buffalo and the Mongoose. The story carries forward as Balram moves to Delhi/NCR with his new master Ashok and his wife Pinky. He gets influenced by the consumerism and urban culture of the city and loses his innocence. One of the triggers of Balram's anger is when Pinky kills an unidentified poor child while driving in a drunken state and Balram is asked to take charge of the killing. This further aggravates Balram's anger against the bourgeois. Frustrated by his socio-political position, Balram begins to engage himself into dark activities such as alcoholism and prostitution. His anger finally finds its vent as we learn that he murders his master Ashok and flees to Bangalore eventually opening a successful taxi business. The darkness found in the urban culture of the Delhi metropolis thereby darkens the story of Balram.

An anti-hero discusses the flaws of a society where moral standards and religious beliefs are questioned and are under a state of paradox. The postmodernist quality of the book resides in the wit of the narrator. His Horatian and realistic commentaries on social realities lead us to believe in the impossibility of arriving at specific conclusions



about the world around us. His delusional character successfully manages to persuade the reader into questioning all norms related with the hypocrite Indian society.

Other social issues like internal migration, marginalisation, disillusionment and chaotic value systems are very graphically presented in the novel with regular images of juxtaposition between the two different worlds of the bourgeois and the proletariat. Such features therefore make *The White Tiger* a highly Postmodernist text that speaks for the speechless. According to Linda Hutcheon, Postmodern writing's chief characteristic is its "inherently paradoxical structure". The life and story of Balram is filled with paradoxes. As a self obsessed bigot, Balram spends all his life and energy in coming out of his village of 'Darkness' to the 'Light' of the upper class society and city. However, it is a paradox that Balram fails to acknowledge that the Light is even darker than the Darkness. It is again highly paradoxical as we compare two different worlds of the haves and the have-nots in the same country. Despite being a contrast, these worlds are so inexplicably merged and entangled with each other that one cannot do without the other. India is a country where the rich cannot imagine their lives without servants and the poor are so deprived that they cannot think without the idea of being servants.

A postmodernist parallel has also been drawn between the opposing value systems of Authoritarianism and Freedom; Ethics and Corruption; Spiritualism and Materialism.

Now there are some... thinking men of all political parties, who think that not many of these gods actually exist. Some believe that none of them exist. There's just us and an ocean of darkness around us... It's true that all these gods seem to do awfully little work - much like our politicians - and yet keep winning re-election to their golden thrones in heaven, year after year. (Adiga 9)

Balram's harsh sarcasm questions not only the system of governance but also the philosophy of religion. Like most Postmodernist texts, the value systems and concepts of morality, spiritualism and materialism are juxtaposed to draw incomprehensible inferences about the modern world. A little later, Balram also pinpoints the correct image of the Postmodern society where an ambitious man desirous of success must be "straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time". Success therefore, is not the result of ideal hardwork but a consequence of debauchery and



cunningness, the presence of which Balram finds in all the rich, successful men around him.

The title, “The White Tiger” given to Balram as well as the book itself proves how rarely an intelligent and high spirited individual is born and able to survive in an unfavourable environment of poverty and oppression. The book shows how Balram was the very few amongst the many in a jungle filled with apathy, sickness, corruption and evil parasites like the Raven and the Stork. The wilderness of the story is compared to that of a jungle where a few men dominate and the rest struggle for survival. The most corrupt and vile men in the book like, the Raven, the Stork and the Great Socialist are given symbolic nouns or adjectives as names in order to give the unanimous idea of cruelty and hypocrisy in the society.

Symbolism is immensely used in the book in order to juxtapose the rustic with the grandiose. For instance, the Black Fort in the book is made a distant unapproachable destination in the childhood of Balram. The Black Fort symbolises the luxurious life of elegance and materialism that seems unachievable to the lower class. Later, as Balram visits the fort with his master, he fearlessly takes a leap and swims across the fort hence signifying his potential victory over the failure of his class. Another symbol used in the story is books which represent happiness, knowledge, liberation and freedom. Books become the cause behind the title of ‘white tiger’ that Balram is endowed with. It is Balram’s curiosity for knowledge that assists him into becoming a successful entrepreneur. Religion being another issue of debate is also discussed in the novel in the form of symbols. For instance, after settling down in Delhi, Balram visits the market for the first time and buys two idols of Ram and Hanuman which are symbolic of his own equation with his master Ashok. Likewise, an image of Balram devoutly approaching to wash the feet of his master is reversely symbolic of the mythical story of Krishna and his aide Sudama. In another narration drawn in the text, Balram is being told that his name means a mythological man who was “a sidekick of the God Krishna” which is very apt for his character. Balram’s inferior position even in terms of religion is therefore a question to the unfairness of God on him and his class. This questioning of religious ideology is therefore a highly postmodernist asset found in the book. It is worth noting that all the upper class characters in the book are portrayed negatively and given negative symbols of animals that are mostly wild, self absorbed and unsympathetic. The

author forbids the reader in knowing their real names by giving them symbolic negative nouns like Raven, Mongoose, Stork and Wild Boar which represent their images as well as intentions.

Cosmopolitan aspects in *The White Tiger* also contribute in its Postmodernity. The very first lines of the book are highly cosmopolitan – “Neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English.” (03). An Indian national communicates to a Chinese Prime Minister in a language that is borrowed from Britain. The shameless violence inflicted upon the refugees in France in the essay *On Cosmopolitanism* can be paralleled with the socio-psychological and physical tortures borne by the urban working class in India. It is therefore a matter of no surprise when Derrida demands a new concept of the ‘city’ altogether in the following lines:

This is not to suggest that we ought to restore an essentially classical concept of the city by giving it new attributes and powers; neither would it be simply a matter of endowing the old subject we call ‘the city’ with new predicates. No, we are dreaming of another concept, of another set of rights for the city, of another politics of the city. (Derrida 8)

Balam’s hate is the consequence of the triumphalism found in the upper class. It is further aggravated by a dormant, almost supernatural malignance and hostility of the city of Delhi towards his character which later compels the frustrated Balam to take the life of his master and snatch his freedom from his clutches. The city darkly seems to assist him towards such villainy as he proceeds to kill Ashok:

The city knew my secret... a woman walked with a cellophane bag; my headlights shone into the bag and turned the cellophane transparent. I saw four large dark fruits inside the bag—and each dark fruit said, You’ve already done it. In your heart you’ve already taken it. Even the road—the smooth, polished road of Delhi that is the finest in all of India—knew my secret... it seemed as though there were no government in Delhi that day. (Adiga 245).

The impacts of Globalisation on postcolonial and postmodernist literature can be seen in the assimilations of various cultures together which are themselves one sided. In a quote mentioned by Hartweiger, such dominance of literary culture by postcolonial impacts may be understood:



Globalization often works in one direction, the global north forcing its economic and cultural influence on the global south, negating the opportunity for equal exchange between peoples. The fallout of this uneven relationship permeates all aspects of society and the world. The increase of hybrid identities, diasporic populations, and migratory labour...result from Globalization. (Hartweiger 03)

The story of a postcolonial, subversive socio-economic system, *The White Tiger* talks about the hybrid identities of people like Ashok and Pinky who were uncomfortable in America as well as India and that of migratory labourers like Balram who were subdued to the extent of becoming psychopaths. In Hartweiger's language, the dominance of the global north over the south is visible in the presence of Postcolonialism in *The White Tiger*. The unequal exchange between peoples is evident in the social inequality and miscommunication between the two classes in the text along with the deeply imbibed postcoloniality in characters including Balram which gives way to the formation of an uneven, unequal equation between classes within the society, one of which is always considered 'educated, Americanised' and therefore wise. Balram's fascination with the fairness and western outfits of Pinky, his obsession with white skin and blonde hair among other examples in the text are proof to his postcolonial mindset – "White skin has to be respected" (193).

Subalternism in *The White Tiger* is evinced in the fact when we learn that the ladies of the house often have repetitive arguments with many women together dominating the mother of Balram. The death of Balram's mother is given a dark and mysterious image.

However, after his conversion to Ashok the rich entrepreneur, Balram does not remain as bewildered about his new identity as the previous Ashok. His pride in his ethnicity and originality overcomes his taste once he becomes a master. Balram also defies conventional stereotypes when it comes to his reading habits and personal space. Unlike his culture conscious master, Balram's preferences are not affected by the western likes and dislikes of others; rather he ridicules them in his own cold hearted style. He is highly oriental and proud. His sexual preferences lie in Indian women and not blondes anymore. He is a regular reader of eastern poets like Rumi, Ghalib and Iqbal. "Don't waste your money on those American books." He says, "They're so *yesterday*. I am tomorrow." The line also speaks something of the domination of specific

literature of the west over the east that has now become a mandatory part of the oriental culture, a thing repetitively said by scholars like Aijaz Ahmed and Said.

In another quote stated by Hartweiger the difference between globalised nations and their cultural dominance is pointed out:

The historically unparalleled amount of contact between peoples generated by globalization has spawned a new set of problems for our global community. Rather than bringing individuals together to embrace difference as such, globalization's centrifugal forces often reduce or assimilate difference into dominant cultures, creating intensely asymmetrical power structures. (Hartweiger 03)

The privileges coupled with corrupt pro-capitalist culture encouraged by men like the Great Socialist and the family of Ashok is therefore sucking the life out of the underprivileged class of Balram. Along with the neo-liberal free market policies, come the numerous consumerist luxuries which are endowed upon the upper class by the government and the social system in *The White Tiger*. The desire for these services is evidently seen in the characters of Ashok, Pinky, Mukesh, Uma and several politicians among others. The novel deeply discusses the issues associated with consumerism through the words of Balram. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator rejects the influence of consumerism and understands how it has brought destructive disillusioned environments for the white man – “the white-skinned man has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse” (06), Balram says. Balram however does not realise that he himself is prey to such abuse today. A very similar attitude is reflected in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* by Baudrillard:

...only some people achieve mastery of an autonomous, rational logic of the elements of the environment (functional use, aesthetic organization, cultural accomplishment). Such people do not really deal with objects and do not, strictly speaking, 'consume', whilst the others are condemned to a magical economy, to the valorization of objects as such, and of all other things as objects (ideas, leisure, knowledge, culture): this fetishistic logic is, strictly, the ideology of consumption. (Baudrillard 60)

The combination of unhealthy relationships, chaotic atmosphere of multiculturalism and urban frustration and the use of consumerism as a tool to derive emotional stability is therefore evidently drawing identities suffering from emotional, psychological and



existential crisis in literature and society. Disillusionment therefore is the primary consequence of such frustrations that are jointly harming and creating the lop-sided development of the urban citizen. The character of the protagonist of the book is itself the biggest example of such disillusionment and crisis. Being the son of a dead mother and a downtrodden father; Balram is emotionally downcast by his poverty-ridden family and fellow villagers and shown the door to earn money by the shrewd Kusum at an early age. The emotional sensitivity of Balram is gradually taken away as he grows older. He lives to see an ignorant school master, a quarrelsome family along with physical and emotional miseries in his early childhood. Later, his life is pervaded by cruel masters and an insensitive society hence breeding relationships that were 'half-baked', just as he was. A product of his environment; Balram learns to believe that relationships are only the result of economic dependency and that success can only be achieved through malice. He learns that money is the most powerful weapon and can be used to derive any sort of advantage for oneself. Such practical realities gradually come as an emotional shock to the troubled Balram who was already experiencing an emotional injury inflicted upon him by his insensitive and ignorant master Ashok, a person Balram had initially thought to be a projection of his emotional solace.

Balram's identity crisis is also another factor behind his alienation and disillusionment with the self. As the narrator is born, he is called "Munna", which literally means 'a boy', and thus he was denied identity from the beginning of his infancy. After eight years, his school teacher terms him 'Balram'. Subsequently, a school inspector names him as "White Tiger". His friends from Delhi while poking fun at his country origin call him "Country Mouse" or "village idiot". Towards the end of the story he assumes the identity of his master- Ashok, thus making the process of rising up the social ladder complete. It is therefore evident that Balram regularly shifts from one identity to another but never completely becomes one. Like a fluid in a vessel, he gradually takes shape of the environment he's poured in and becomes what he sees. His shift from a sincere, intelligent student to a cunning 'citified fellow' is a consequence of his adaptability and this hence justifies his crime. Balram's compliance towards becoming a new person prevents him to decisively choose an identity and completely assume it. His rapid shift from one identity to another makes him impotent towards undertaking any single identity and also the responsibility of his actions. Such uneasiness of shifting to identities of 'Munna', 'Balram' or 'Ashok' makes him an incomplete, 'half-baked'

character whose emotions and behaviour are frustrated even before they take their final shape. The emotional discomfort brought about by the various identities of Balram hence prevents any emotional action to happen in his story. Balram of Delhi can never make himself as innocent and studious as the Balram of Laxmangharh. Likewise, Ashok of Bangalore can never spit beetle juice and touch himself in public like the Balram of Delhi. Such dearth of making pathways to express his behaviour or emotions renders Balram a frustrated, young urban dweller whose stagnant emotions decay and eventually die inside. Consequently, he is never able to make meaningful relationships with the people around him and continues to live alienated and depressed in his self-created bubble.

The representation of disillusionment of upper class through the major character of Ashok is also worth noticing. Going through much mental chaos, Ashok is a foreign returned, half- Indian and half- Americanised man whose major thought processes collide with each other. Somewhat like Gogol of *Namesake*, Ashok probably begins to hate the culture shock of America and decides to return to his country with his wife who with her incapability to adapt, further makes his situation troublesome. At a constant conflict with his value systems, Ashok is half liberal and unconsciously chauvinistic and dominating in the novel.

Ashok's wife Pinky also exemplifies the postmodernist complexity of the novel. Her subordination lies in the typical postmodern idea of scholars like Foucault, Butler or de Beauvoir who suggest that female subordination lies in the language and culture itself. It is the harsh, patriarchal, condemning language of Ashok and his family that does not let Pinky make her own decisions. The body language and chauvinism inherited by Ashok as a man from the patriarchs of the family eventually become the reason of their separation. The complexity of her character itself is extreme and rather incomplete as we notice that she is a mere projection of Balram's perception of her. However her self-obsession cannot be ignored when we observe her temperamental, indignant nature towards Balram and her husband. Her interactions evince her lack of tenderness and sympathy towards everyone around her. Her hypocrisy lies much revealed when we notice her conscience only surfaces after she has killed a child. Despite being a modern urban educated woman, Pinky's morals lay stagnant until the point she herself fears of being accused of murder. In her attempt of redemption she gives some little money to



Balram and leaves or perhaps, escapes. Thus the sense of disillusionment again captures the character of Pinky who leaves after being corrupted by the city of Delhi. Her urban background can also be related with the omnipresent apathy prevalent everywhere in the text.

The level of corruption in the country is explored by the author through the relationships between the politicians and elite which are another example of the lack of sensitivity of the two classes for the ordinary citizen. Their victimisation is viewed from a very close angle through the eyes of Balram. The apathy present in every rural and urban elite cannot be ignored by even an ordinary reader and is therefore representative of the constant element of apathy found in the postmodernist society. Apathy, Disillusionment, Consumerism and Alienation are therefore such common factors that have reduced the modern urban citizen to a half developed personality that only cares to satiate immediate goals. Elements like spirituality, moral consciousness, religion and meaningful relationships are found to be absent in the novel just like in modern real life.

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