

Post-modern India and Identity Politics in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: An Exploration

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Abstract

The White Tiger which has been charged of being a Booker's book and not a bright book of life shows us the rotten society of post-modern India. A society where corruption has become rampant; where politics is the roost of crooked people; where elections are sold and bought routinely for political mileage. The whole novel seems to be a game of identity where the haves are trying to maintain their self-hood and have-nots are seekers of self-hood. Adiga has tried to show how in the ruse of India-shining, India herself is hiding her original identity of India-struggling; in the ruse of the White Tiger the novelist depicts what is hidden and sidelined in the booklets of our diplomats.

Keywords- Postcolonial, Empowerment, Identity, Entrepreneur

The white Tiger is a story of a nameless village-boy Munna, the eponymous White Tiger alias Balram who had never an identity of his own, grows into an entrepreneur. Apparently in Dickensian fashion the story is told by the protagonist himself. The narrator believes metafictionally that he is going to tell a story which will supplement the story of the booklet handed over to the Chinese Premier. The author seems to correct the story of Shashi Tharoor in *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone* "an India which is no longer a snake-charmer but a soft-ware guru."

The novel seems to be a post-modern "Panchatantra" in which bestial identity has been bestowed on human beings. Here, we come to see the game of identity politics, how cunningly the narrator reserves for himself an admirable and reverential image and awards the rich with contemptuous animal images like the Stork, the Mongoose, the Boar, the Raven etc. There are traces of identity politics - individual and collective – in the novel. The inauguration of identity politics starts with gaining a name.

Aravind Adiga's "extra ordinary and brilliant first novel" which appeared in 2008, bagged the prestigious Booker-prize for the same year. Since then it has been enjoying a great critical acclaim. The novel seems to explicate the attempts of the characters to attain

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empowerment, representation and recognition and politics of how to maintain these in 21st century India. This paper reserves the term identity for “.... A sense of separate and unique selfhood, but it also acknowledges how people see themselves, is shaped by a web of social and other relationship that distinguished them from other people.” and seeks to summarize briefly the game of identity politics through reading the process of nomenclature in plot, master-servant relationship and education-system in theme and animal imagery of the novel.

Ironically, the protagonist is granted a nameless name – “Munna”- “a non-naming boy” in the beginning. As the story unfolds, a series of naming of the protagonist can be seen. The name that the “perpetually thieving teacher” grants him – Balram – the “sidekick” of the great chauffeur Krishna ironically symbolizes unconditional servitude and it explores the idea of achieving identity not taken but granted. We can see this in the lines:

Well, it's up to me, then, isn't it?
He passed his hand through his hair
And said, 'We'll call you... Ram.
Wait- don't we have a Ram in this class?
I don't want any confusion. It'll be
Balram. You know Balram was, don't you?
'No, Sir,'.
He was the sidekick of the god Krishan.
Know what my name is?
'No, Sir'.
He laughed. 'Krishna'. (*The White Tiger*_13-14)

The school inspector's gift “The White Tiger” to a promising boy of a government school is the ultimate recognition of human agency tangled in hostile ideology which crushes down the identity of a boy from the ghetto. Balram's identification of himself formerly to a bus conductor and finally to his master Ashok whose name he virtually appropriates, illustrates the politics of gaining identity. The term identity politics “...reflects a shift away from universalism and towards particularism”. And this novel which is an anti-defacement drive by Adiga, shows how “the White Tiger” of the village finagles a position as a driver for his erstwhile landlord's son and by slitting his (Ashok's) throat becomes the driver of drivers of Bangalore.

One of the major themes of the novel is a focus on the education-system of post-modern India, especially in villages. And this is the second most important stage of identity acquisition after nomenclature. Adiga's rant seems to be harsher on the education system. Sardonicly, he remarks, “You always ought to talk about man's education when describing him”. (*The White Tiger*:32). He depicts how qualitative academic education is reserved for the rich. The landlord sends his children to Dhanbad, a relatively advanced city, and the children of the poor remain in “village-paradise”. Unlike Dickens, Adiga is more hostile to the system than to an individual teacher. It is this education, as Adiga opines that makes

Balram Halwai a “half-baked Indian” and “The country is full of people like him...” Balram Halwai whose ideas are “...half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half cooked ideas...” is the product of such an education system. It is the system which is accommodated to make a servant remain a servant. The government primary school becomes the roost of cheats and thugs. And thus, Adiga strips away the veneer of “Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan” and lays it bare before us. On the other hand the qualitative education enables the masters to bribe and marry to transcend race and caste but unsuccessfully.

The by-product of patriarchy- “lavish marriage” with “lavish dowry”- makes a child drop his schooling and become an indentured child-labourer. These are some clues “...to understanding a country rife with despair and disrepair.....” Statics show how poverty is on the rise in India:

(I) Four in every 10 children are malnourished, says a UN report. (II) India ranks a lowly 66 out of 88 countries in the Global Hunger Index 2008. The report says India has more hungry people – more than 200 million – than any other country in the world. (III) One Third of the world’s poor live in India, according to the latest poverty estimates from the World Bank. Based on its new threshold of poverty - \$ 1.25 a day – the number of India’s poor people has actually gone up from 421 million in 1981 to 456 million in 2005. (IV) India ranks 128 out of 177 in UN’s Human Development Index. ... Aravind Adiga’s story of a rickshawallah’s move from the “darkness” of the rural India to the “light” of urban Gurgaon (is enough) to remind us of the harsh fact behind the fiction. (Times of India)

However, being an original listener Balram becomes “... a self-taught entrepreneur.” and a “self-styled White Tiger”. He himself says “(...I am not an original thinker, - but I am an original listener.)” Balram manages himself to excel but unfortunately it is his “citification” “...from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness”. The promise of the school inspector for scholarship never comes to him; but it comes to him in the form of a red bag stuffed with seven lakh rupees after a murder – a quasi-patricide – symbolizing breaking of the “coop”. The protagonist “... is not going to let a lack of education keep him in the dark”. The novel displays a shift from training in ideas to gaining material advancement. The education of a corrupt society is very effectively expressed through animal imagery of the novel. A society where an evil is hatched to counter an evil. Can this chaotic education ever be justified? Never. But the ‘white tiger’ of the novel justifies it as his conscience does not prick him for what he has done.

The eponymous “white tiger” also the narrator and protagonist of the novel is disgruntled with the present system of society. It results in making the very-narration of the novel rife with animal images. It shows the bestiality of human relationships. The characters who are enjoying social privileges, are branded with oppressive and contemptuous animal images “... based on their characters, Balram introduces us to the wild Boar, the Stork, the

Mongoose.” the Raven and the Buffalo. Since the protagonist is deprived of the social privileges, he enjoys himself the privilege of telling the tale of exclusion and denigration. And thus, the story unfolds how from the pack of brutal animals a “human-spider” weaves a defensive cobweb and evolves into a “White Tiger”. The animal imagery of the novel depicts the aridity of human emotions in the characters who are screwing the underdogs in order to maintain their selfhood. On the other hand this imagery also displays the lack of guts in “chickens” (*Aam Adami*) to break the “Rooster Coop” – “...the ‘coop’ of conventional morality.” and the boredom of indentured servitude in order to gain their identity. And reverential is the image of the one who breaks the “coop” – the hackneyed established ideology. We see three distinguished categories of animal imagery: the oppressive animal-images viz. the Stork, the Boar, the Buffalo, the Raven and the Mongoose for the landlords; the derogatory animal images viz. human spiders for tea-shop boys, Country Mouse, greedy pig, Donkey and dog for Balram, “Monkey circle” for the drivers, “Chickens” for the underdogs and indentured labourers; and the last one is the only reverential image of the “White Tiger” for Balram who breaks the “Coop”. This “White Tiger” who “...comes only once in a generation?” has some black spots on his skin and surprisingly enough, is afraid of a two foot long gecko. The animal imagery of the novel shows not only the brutality of landlords but also the Machiavellian character of Balram Halwai. Balram’s India is “...a merciless, corrupt Darwinian jungle where only the ruthless survive”. And in this jungle “Four bestial landlords oppress the villagers of this All-India-garh”.

There are three different sensibilities of the collective identity in the novel: caste-sensibility, communal sensibility, and national sensibility. Balram’s embittered remark: “That’s my caste-my destiny” still clings to Indian society. The landlords reinforce this sensibility while the underdogs struggle to negate it. One of the landlords confirms Balram’s caste before appointing him as a driver. And even the old Sikh driver, Balram’s trainer emphasizes on caste and remarks: “Sweet-makers’,.... ‘How can you learn to drive?’” And further he categorizes that only “Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs - they are fighters, they can become drivers”. But Balram and his father defy it.

The narrator hammers the communalism of a secular country. Where the house of landlords are the very stone on which the rift between the two communities – the Hindu and the Muslim – is whetted; and not the government hospital of the village. The pert reply of the Stork to his grandson- “Call yourself Gavaskar, Azharuddin is a Muslim.” corroborates it; Ashok’s marriage with a Christian lady creates an implicit turmoil in his family. This shows that these are the corybant privileged who sharpen the knife of communalism and not the unprivileged and marginalized who are on the bread- line. Balram Halwai has a strong sense of nationality, even though he is dissatisfied with the present condition of his country. He is aware of the Sino-Indian conflict, the two Asian countries on which,

...future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white skinned man, has wasted him through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse... (*The White Tiger*: 5-6).

Balram sprays an oblique comment on Laxamangarh which is “rife with despair and disrepair” with strong sense of national-pride.

He addresses Wen Jiabao – “Your nation’s history has been shaped by my district...”. The advancement of America is implicit in the character of Mr. Ashok and it is contrasted with the backwardness of India. Sardonicly, Adiga equates the gods with Indian politicians:

It’s true that all these gods seem to do awfully little work – much like our politicians – yet keep winning re-election to their golden thrones in heaven, year after year. (*The White Tiger*: 8).

The prostitutes assume a façade of westerner looks to hike their rates; and the villagers “Like eunuchs discussing the Kamsutra..., discuss the elections in Laxamangarh”. And this (“Election Fever”) is the worst disease of the country as told by the protagonist. Actuality, “The novel exposes the rot in the three-pillars of the modern India – democracy, enterprise and justice”. Balram in his “breezy-absurd” tone expresses concern that the seeds of “India-shining” which were sown by the government could never burgeon into reality. All these matter to Balram not because he is a victim of social injustice and is granted nothing but “... a birthday from the government” but because his individual identity has its roots in the collective one, the national identity.

Another major theme which crystallizes the identity politics is the master-servant relationship, “...the bed-rock of middle-class Indian life...” This relationship in India is sustained by the ideology which “... in stabilized by its strong family structures...” Laxamangarh and its patron god Hanuman “...a shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion.” both symbolize unconditional servitude. Ironically, the protagonist remarks “You are like a father and mother to me...” The first meaningful name “Balram” granted to the protagonist underlines the sustenance of this relationship.

The only underdog who refuses to accept the master-servant relationship is Balram’s father. He is a man of ideas choked in “false-consciousness”, while Balram is a man of action. In the novel the acquisition of identity is explored in three different ways at three different places: by setting all the granted names aside. Unlike “Mohammad Mohammad” in the ruse of Ram Persad and prostitutes who mask their identity to hike-up their value. The three different places – the village, Delhi and Bangalore – depict, simply speaking, three different kinds of master-servant relationships. In Laxmangarh we see the feudal face of this relationship which also lingers on in Delhi. Bangalore depicts “the call-centre generation” face of this relationship where all identities – individual and collective – are respected. The idea is emphasized by the remark of “sassy anti-hero” “...the chandelier has a personality of its own.” Here is a written contract between the master and the servant. This contract respects

the interest of the both. Here is a compensation for the injured party, though Delhi continues in Bangalore in respect of bribery and thuggery. And in Delhi we see the transitional face of this relationship between the feudal face and the post-modern face. All these are because of the novel being a corrective story – correcting whatever is excluded and hidden in the booklet of our Prime-minister.

The novel rejects categorically the two methods of obtaining identity – the masquerading and the granted – and values alone the third method – to gain it. It seems to offer an implicit urge of revolt against the established values of unconditional servitude which is sustained by the family structure in India. And it also shows that one who does not respect one's own identity and others' as well is not better than an animal. *The White Tiger* is the story of this deficiency. Consequently, it becomes a bestiary of “call-centre generation” – a Post-modern Panchatantra – which does not show a way out like a bright book of life.

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