

Power and Hegemony: A Post-Colonial Marxist Interpretation of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

*The paper offers an in-depth exploration of hierarchies and class divisions as portrayed through the lens of Marxist Cultural Theory, focusing on the novel *White Tiger* (2008) by Arvind Adiga. Through a detailed analysis of this novel, this paper demonstrates the class struggle and resistance of everyday man, in doing so it becomes a cultural counter-discourse to hegemonic powers. This paper expresses the stance of the working class, through the character of the protagonist Balram. Written in an epistolary form, it chronicles the journey of Balram Halwai from a child born into poverty to a successful entrepreneur. By using the *White Tiger* as a central point of discussion, the paper delves into the intricate relationship between the concept of Caste/class oppression and hegemony in society which further contributes to shaping ordinary perceptions.*

Keywords: Power, Hegemony, Moral Corruption, Othering, Subaltern

Introduction

The term 'Hegemony' originated from a Greek verb meaning to 'guide' or to 'lead', tracing its back to Homer. "John Stuart Mill put forward the idea that 'hegemonia' was leadership freely based on 'attachment or consent'." (Anderson 1). The idea of 'Hegemony' was a significant contribution by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) in his famous work *Prison Notebooks*. (1929). According to Gramsci, Power and Hegemony are intricately related to one another. To hold 'power' is to hold the ability to make something or someone act in a way they would not otherwise have acted. But hegemony is not only limited to power, neither is it some set of imposed principles. It is also the account of the relationship between powerlessness and power. It is always developed within the social, economic and political relations functioning in society. But hegemony is not some fictive word obscuring unclot oppression. Rather it is an unpleasant ever-present reality that subtly makes its presence in our everyday life. The paper plans to investigate how power and hegemony operates in society with special reference to Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008)

Adiga's first novel *The White Tiger*, won the Man Booker Prize in the same year making him the fourth Indian to win the Booker Prize after Salman Rushdie (1981), Arundhati Roy (1997), and Kiran Desai (2006). Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* unwraps the existing hegemonic societal conditions of post-liberated modern India. The interesting part of the narrative is that he does not wall himself with the portrayal of countryside India; rather illustrates the conditions of city and village alike, showing their consistent contrast in vivid colours. Unlike his contemporaries like Arundhati Roy, Adiga does not hammer the questions of justice or injustice rather he lays bare the incident and the events leading to it. Adiga posts complete and blind freedom to his readers. He fulfills his commitment as a writer portraying the harsh realities of contemporary India. In doing so, he contributes to the multitude of shades of Indian English fiction.

Textual Analysis and Close Reading of the Novel

Adiga *The White Tiger* is a crime thriller bildungsroman. The novel is set in a box-structured narrative. A one-sided unfolding of happenings in the life of the protagonist Balram Halwai. Narrated in an epistolary pattern, the entire story unfolds through an email to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier, the protagonist. Balram is the son of a rickshaw puller in an interior village of India named Laxmangarh. Laxmangarh is geographically located in Sikar district, Rajasthan. The novel diverges into minute detail of the nation of India. Here the notion of the nation is read through the concept of class and related social relations of inequality, exclusion, and oppression. In doing so, it chronicles the journey of the young intelligent child, forced into child labour at a tender age due to poverty. His "half-baked" education, growth, class-based interest, and finally ideological elaboration extend beyond the boundaries of acceptable social behaviour. An analysis of the idea of 'class' in societies such as India where conventional class divisions replicate a division of economic, social and therefore, occupational disadvantages from one generation to next. In a paper titled *Democratic Practice and Social Inequality in India* (2002) Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen analyses how the quality of democracy is affected by social inequality and class oppression.

At the beginning of the novel, Adiga provides a subtle economic contextual background. Balram, the protagonist, has no name or age as such. While enrolling in school, the teacher gives him the name for the sake of convenience. Similarly, later in life, while labouring at a nearby tea shop, he is given an "age" because apparently according to the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act of 1986, it is illegal to employ a child as a worker. Balram is sharp and intelligent. By providing direct insight into the young child's mind, Adiga paves the way for the readers to direct access to little Balram's intensity of love for knowledge. Soon Balram is de-schooled and pushed into shouldering the responsibility of earning for the family. A child, born into poverty despite his intelligence, even if he has all the qualities necessary to become a 'man of culture' is compelled to waste his talents labouring away for money, that is how he became an obstinate self-taught man, in author's word "half-baked". Balram's education suffered and his resentment was intense. Balram traded fruitful hours of his days working for wages at a local tea shop, which could barely buy a day's meal, while his father pulled a rickshaw. By the end of each month, the village landlord comes to collect the "road tax" from him. This tax strips Balram's father of almost one-third of his earnings. Right from the beginning of the novel, we see how a play of hierarchy works in society. In this regard, it is important to understand the stance of 'binarism' introduced by the French structural linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, which propagates the 'binary system' as the combination of two extremes in cultural constructs of reality. In the violent hierarchy of powers, one term of opposition always dominates the other. In Adiga's novel, it is the village landlord against Balram, the 'other'.

Balram's father falls sick while labouring intensely under the sun and coughs blood. There are no hospital facilities in the village, therefore he is being taken away to the government hospital in the neighbouring village. While waiting for the doctor, he breathes his last. No doctor arrives. His

father's death has an intense traumatic effect on the child's mind. While they perform the last rites, the child articulates by the sight of burning feet that his father is resisting even in death. Adiga has used the character of Balram's father as a tool for resistance. A hardworking poor father who refuses to accept his servile status, his inability to function under conditions that negate his self-worth drive. He finds his humanity, even at horrific costs and under conditions he cannot explain to Balram or anyone else. He shows resistance in every step of life. Resisting Balram's grandmother, Kusum's decision to take Balram from school. Resisting to sit on the ground near the tea shop, because chairs were "reserved" for important customers, resisting his untimely death by infectious tuberculosis.

Corruption and Moral Degeneration

Adiga's perspective in describing modern India is essentially realistic. His work captures the sickening corruption of the country that feeds on the poor, making them poorer. The novel can be read as a stirring critique of contemporary India. Adiga demonstrates the moral corruption of the educational section, particularly the village school of Laxmangarh. The children of the school shall have school uniforms which are sanctioned by the government every year. But the garments never reach the body of the intended children, rather they are sold in the nearby village market, providing a surplus profit to the schoolmaster. In the year 1995, the Government of India introduced the concept of the mid-day meal to school-going children, according to which children are supposed to be fed in the school during lunch, but the schoolmaster exports the grains to the market. However, the corruption of the schoolmaster cannot be viewed as an isolated event, he has not been credited with a salary for over six months or more. "There was supposed to be free food at my school—a government program gave every boy three rotis, yellow daal, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never saw rotis, or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money." (28)

The following chapter chronicles the hypocrisy and selfishness of the health sector of India. Before every election, the villagers are promised new things, like electricity, proper drainage, hospital facilities, etc. which in reality never takes place post the election. Even if there is a government hospital in some remote village, there are no doctors. According to paperwork, some young medical practitioners are withdrawing a monthly government salary while working shifts in air-conditioned private hospitals. Therefore, the novel freezes our thinking as it lays bare the corruption in different sectors in India, corruption as a venomous plant that has grown into a full-grown tree with its claws reaching deep into the ground.

In Arundhati Roy's essay *Election Season in a Dangerous Democracy* published in the work *AZADI: Freedom. Fascism. Fiction* (2020) she observes, "... that in India today...to be poor is a crime. To defend the poor is to plot to overthrow the government." (53)

In *The White Tiger*, Adiga crafts how works are being done by dishonestly persuading people in higher power through the character portrayal of Mr. Ashok and his brother, who are witnessed bribing different political leaders in Delhi. However, as they come across the statue of Gandhi Mr. Ashok bows his head in shame and disappointment. Here, the statue forms a part of the discourse that fuels our country's value. The discourse of "father of the nation" or "country's pride" and "moral compass" is ironically being hammered on.

Facade of Caste and Religion

The narrative embodies the overlap of multiple issues apart from poverty and corruption. With passing time Balram is successful in finding his way out of Laxmangarh. After earning a driving lesson, Balram finds it arduous to get a job, out of luck, he stamps on the landlord's villa unaware of whose house it is. Adiga exposes the malignant sickness of casteism through the realistic depiction

of Balram's job interview. Treatment of caste is contextualised keeping in mind the complex socio-cultural stance within the larger political scenarios of post-liberated India. As Balram is faced with the untypical question "Halwai? ... What caste is that, top or bottom?" (51)

As Sekhar Bandyopadhyay in his landmark work *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*, observes: it was the idea of 'hierarchy' based on the binary opposition of purity and pollution that determined the relative rank of castes and also controlled the relationship between them (12)

Hawaii is a title/caste name in the Indian social class system whose traditional occupation was making sweets and confectionery. There are several reasons for which it is significantly important today to pay heed to the distinction between:

1. Seeing a person as a human being first and
2. Understanding their role broadly in terms of their religion/ caste affiliations which need not crowd one's sentiments in treating them right.

Furthermore, the intricate nexus of social hierarchies unfolds as Balram becomes the number one driver, occupying a secondary position as opposed to his arch-rival, Ram Prasad who has been serving the family for the last twenty years. After a month's stay, Balram finds out the truth about Ram Prasad's religious affiliations. The unfolding of his Muslim identity marks a fatal for his future at the household. In other texts again, such as Amartya Sen's exceptional work *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006), Sen puts forth the idea that "to see a person exclusively in terms of only one of his/her many identities, is of course, a deeply crude intellectual move." It is ironic to note an individual's need to hide his religious and caste identity to be employed in India. After the fallout, he gets banished from his job and Balram replaces him as the number one driver. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) observes that power is maintained in the society through the actual consent of the subject, he calls it Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). For Althusser, religion becomes an ideology because it inserts individuals as subjects and therefore reinforces ideas to control them.

The point to recognise is that in India a singular religious line remains politically and culturally explosive. These characteristic flaws lead us to overlook the heterogeneity of one's identity. The increasing tendency of using religious identities as the leading or sole principal of classification of the people of the world has led to much grossness of social analysis.

Master/Servant Dichotomy

Oscar Wilde once made an enigmatic remark: "...most people are other people... their thoughts are someone else's opinion, their lives a mimicry, their passion a quotation" Adiga's protagonist Balram is a fine example of this. He was influenced to an amazing extent by his employer Mr. Ashok with whom he identified.

According to Marxist cultural theory, society is divided into two respective classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The bourgeoisie or the upper class believes in the inherent superiority of their position over the other and thereby they exercise a right to dominate the other.

The upper class enjoys certain privileges. The working class is not capable of pursuing their interest in their name but requires a representative who would compensate for the fragmentation of their living condition by appearing above them as master. As Ranajit Guha aptly puts it in "Dominance without Hegemony" "...it is the interplay of the universal and the contingent, the logical and the empirical aspects of dominance and subordination, that makes up the warp and the weft in the fabric of world history." (21) From his birth Balram has witnessed the tragic silencing and marginalisation of his father by the landlords. After employment, he becomes the servant of the wealthy landlord. Balram, a representative of the working class, sells his labour power to earn money. There is an inherent binary opposition induced with the terms 'master' and 'servant'. The idea relies upon a train of thought that treats the servant as illiterate, uncultured and non-civilisable.

Balram is objectified and made into something less than human. While the master and servant symbolises power The servant is the “other” of the master.

O. Mannoni’s work *Psychologie de la Colonisation* which appeared in English as *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization* in 1990, was one of the earliest attempts to analyze the psychological process of colonialism. While his argument was put forward for colonial master and Indigenous slave, as it can be witnessed the same can be applied to an upper-class landlord/master and his slave/servant because the mutual thematic concerns run parallel through both the situation: the rich dominating the poor, the weak being under the guardianship of the powerful, of systematic exploitation of a difference in standards of living, and two contrasting personalities and their power- relation to each other; in consequence of which as shown in the novel, Balram becomes the colonised or enslaved and the landlord becomes the coloniser or enslaver.

To provide an instance from the novel, after Balram is recruited as Mr. Ashok’s driver the salary question is raised by Mukesh sir to which Balram responds: “Absolutely nothing, sir. You’re like a father and mother to me, and how can I ask for money from my parents?” (52)

As Mannoni notices, a native suffers from a “dependency complex”. The European exploits this and casts himself in the paternalistic role of the parent/master which allows him to exercise power and control over the other. On the other hand, the native who feels inferior rectifies it by establishing a child-parent relationship with the master. Within the safe dichotomy of his imagined relation, he feels safe. But why does this difference occur? As Mannoni says, the structure of personalities and social upbringing are different. While Mr. Ashok is an educated American returned cultured gentleman, Balram is an uncultured half-baked poor Indian man.

Language: A Mockery of Culture

Language has always been connected to issues of class, power and ideology. Rudyard Kipling’s celebrated novel *Kim* (1901), sets the tone of perpetually stereotyped Bengali babu’s unquestioned admiration for anything British. The post-colonial analysis of the novel has rendered it as essentially Euro-centric and imperialist. As Homi Bhaba terms him as the mimic man. While seeking employment Balram forces himself to express himself in English. As English language is a key to reflecting his pretentious cultured background. Balram’s fluency in the language reflects the fact that he is capable of suited refinement.

Formidable Women Characters

Adiga dismantles the popular feminist understanding that assumes gender overshadows the class cultural differences to form a universal category of feminine. Chanda Talapet Mohanty, a distinguished professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Syracuse University in her work, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Western Discourses* (2007) for instance criticizes: “the assumption that all of us of the same gender across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogeneous group identified before the process of analysis... Thus, the discursive consensual homogeneity of ‘women’ as a group is mistaken for the historically specific groups of women.” (338). Adiga endorses the collective idea of Mohanty through the character portrayal of the grandmother Kusum and Pinky Madam.

In discussing the mentioned point, it should also be kept in mind that *White Tiger* does not venture into the mindset of the vast middle-class educated society. Rather focuses on primarily two classes: the upper and the lower. Despite belonging to the subaltern strata or the lower class, Kusum exercises a stronghold on the family. It would be oxymoronic to postulate Kusum as an empowering self-determined subaltern subject. While she is socially and economically subaltern (oppressed) but possesses greater agency in terms of domestic household, therefore, refuting Spivak’s accession as subaltern cannot speak. Kusum is in charge of the family finances and acts

as a local collector to whom all the earning members of the family bow. She is always the regulator of justice and injustice in the family. Old yet cunning and independent in her stand of making decisions for the family.

Another significant woman character in the novel is Pinky Madam, Balram's employer's wife. An epitome of modernity, an educated American return independent woman, who herself finds it very difficult to cope with the arbitrary standards of a particular culture. Ideas, concepts, and even consciousness can be traced back to the social upbringing of an individual. As she stands outside the circle of this society's definition of an acceptable daughter-in-law, she constantly urges Mr. Ashok to return to America but fails to convince him. Her rudeness towards Balram inclines due to her unconscious urge to control Mr. Ashok, an urge facilitated by Balram's dependent personality. To Balram, she remains a "mother figure" although her eroticism, sexual assertiveness and her tendency towards despotism is also hinted at. However, in the course of the event, the inhumane treatment of servants in the household enrages her to the point that she decides to leave her husband and move back aboard.

Darkness and Light: The Binary Opposition Of Life

The novel starts with a conventional distinction between rich and poor, of the light and dark. Early on in the novel, the narrative converges on the discovery of two faces of India: one of light and the other of darkness. The light and darkness are metaphors for the class of an individual. According to Marxist theory, there is a sociological category describing the prominent economic divisions within a society. Class is linked with forms of social hierarchy and division. As is observed in the novel the bourgeoisie monopolise the large-scale means of production and distribution of goods and services like the four landlords who rule Laxmangarh. Balram, who belongs to the working class or proletariat. They form the majority of the society, upon whose shoulders the nation runs. The working class has no means of substance and sells themselves or their labour to survive. Shows various instances of how being born in a life of darkness can be the worst possible thing that can happen. They serve to sustain an oppressive social order. Here, the economy becomes the ultimate determining factor and central basis for other discriminations and divisions in one's life. People in darkness are anonymous. Their life or death does not matter to anyone. Not even to their parents. They are as insignificant as specks of dust in the metropolitan Delhi atmosphere.

Marx and Engels argue that capitalism tends to divide society between two major classes – capitalists and workers, as in times of economic growth or development, classes get pushed into either of the two major classes. The Communist Manifesto offers a brief listing of historical classes... freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf... in a word, oppressor and oppressed... (9) always stand in constant opposition to one another.

A rapture in the narrative occurs when a child playing on the road is run over by Pinky madam. accidentally runs over a kid from darkness while drunk driving on an isolated Delhi Road. The following incidents are more shocking as Balram is asked to take the blame for the crime. This incident leaves Balram and his employers' social relations transparent to each other. Balram is compelled to face the real condition of his life. The incident in his life acts as a pivotal point, as he commits being responsible for the murder/accident. For the first time in the narrative, the subordinate class understands his stand in the spectrum of social hierarchy. He experiences profound rage, for the century-long subordination and subjugation, the anger drips down his consciousness like some diseased liquid. This is where he decides to change his destiny in his terms "break the coop".

Never-Ending Circle: Theory of Coop

Adiga in the novel interestingly introduces the readers to the coop theory. According to this, as the writer observes, caged chickens are aware of their impending death. They see how one by one

they are killed by the butcher, but yet they never try to resist. That is why they remain caged and in the same position.

The writer says that we too as human beings are never free. We are caged, socially and culturally in our minds. But Balram is successful in breaking the “coop” first in getting out of the village and establishing a job for himself. Secondly, in resisting marriage when Kusum forces him to. Marriage, in the narrative, plays a significant role as it is the event that determines the future of the protagonist’s relational ties with his family, which is purely economic. When Balram is in the city, he is pressed to send home his hard-earned money. When that continuity is threatened, Kusum invents the opportunity of marriage to tie him down, restoring the connection with his family. And thirdly, Balram breaks the final chain of the coop by murdering Mr. Ashok and robbing him of his money. Sartrean theory of free will as expressed in his work *Being and Nothingness* (1943) expresses that people are affected by the society, environment and household they grow in, but it is through their freedom of will that they transcend the circumstances of their birth. Therefore, “Man is condemned to be free”.

The theory of coop is maintained and regulated by coercion and persuasion. If the employee is found to cheat the landlord by any stance, his entire family would be brutally tortured and killed by the landlord’s goons. Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser in his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (1970) argued that the bourgeoisie maintain power through Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) that operate through actual threats of coercive force/violence to ensure hegemonic grasp over the society.

It is interesting to note the difference in the change of awareness that takes place in our country. While Mr. Ashok’s murder raises an immediate hysteria in the family and society, alarming police officers and newspaper paragraphs resulting in an expeditious effort to find the murderer, no one seems to care about a dead child on a highway. As Arundhati Roy observes in her collection of essays *Algebra of Infinite Justice* (2001), millions of young girls disappear in the nation’s capital every day. No one notices them or their disappearances. No paragraph-long obituaries in *The Hindu* seek to humanize their condition. *White Tiger* grapples with readers’ understanding of how our capacity to mourn the loss is caused precisely by the failure to conceive the poor lives as lives.

Names: Play of Anonymity and Identity

Cultural Studies examines how representations function in a particular society. No object can exist without being represented. That is, every object’s subjectivity and identity have to have some kind of representation. Be it a name, a symbol, a word, or a metaphor. The first symbol that occurs in the novel, is the existence of two cars Honda City and Maruti Suzuki. Honda City plays the role of a status symbol. German sociologist Max Weber in his famous work *Class, Status, Party* (1940) came up with the Weberian Stratification or Three Class System. Wherein he coined the term ‘status symbol’ to denote externally the social position of a person, in terms of economy or social status. Therefore, the model of the car, a man driving, becomes a symbol of the owner’s economic standing.

Names in the novel have another important cultural significance. Adiga through the employment of animal imagery showcased India as a dysfunctional barbaric jungle, immediately reminding us of William Golding’s celebrated work *Lord of the Flies* (1945). Each character is bestowed with an animal’s name hinting at their bestial nature in the social web of the jungle. The names are symbolic constructions that are solely determined by and fully explainable in terms of the hidden meanings adhered to the narrative. The three landlords are called Buffalo, the Stork, and Wild Boar. All of them hold a hyper masculine machismo image which produces fear to achieve patriarchal domination. It is through this hegemonic domination the landlords maintained their power. Balram,

at the beginning of the novel, is named the rare 'white tiger' because of his intellectual sharpness and 'country mouse' when he goes to the city of Delhi as Mr. Ashok's driver. The landlord's elder son (Mukesh) is named Mongoose and his younger son (Ashok) is named Lamb, because of his meek and mild nature.

Conclusion

As readers, we remain at the end of the novel with what appears as the difficult but necessary choice – the assassination of the master. The story can either be read as the unfortunate rebellion caused by the prolonged suppression of the powerless or an exploited individual's change into a rebellious figure, resulting in the death of the tyranny. Discovering to his surprise that his employer is looking for a replacement despite his strength and unquestioned loyalty, pushes him into a moment of extreme vulnerability. Balram finds his entire life crumbling up in front of him. His surprise derives from the pain when he understands he is being replaced and his shot at a better life is going to turn into a nightmare. He murders Mr. Ashok and flees with the money. Money that they mined from not paying tax to the government, and stealing coal from government coal mines. The money that Mr. Ashok would have bribed the politician to keep their mouth shut. It seems reasonable to assume that Balram drew comfort from the realization that no matter how authoritarian the conditions in life are, it is always right to break the coop, to express one's fundamental unhappiness with a social order that forbade happiness. Rather than looking into the past and seeing an unending succession of oppressive conditions he flees into rebellion and resistance. Adiga leaves it to his readers to decide whether Balram was right in making this disastrous decision. It requires deep intuition to comprehend that man's consciousness changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, his social relations, and his social life.

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