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### **SUBALTERN'S QUEST IN THE WHITE TIGER BY ARAVIND ADIGA**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*The White Tiger* is the debut novel by an Indian author Aravind Adiga. It was first published in 2008 and bagged the 40<sup>th</sup> Man Booker prize in the same year. The novel provides a dark humorous perspective of India's class struggle in a globalized world as told through a retrospective narration from Balram Halwai, a village boy. In detailing Balram's journey first to Delhi, where he works as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, and then to Bangalore, the place to which he flees after killing his master and stealing his money, the novel examines issues of religion, caste, loyalty, corruption and poverty in India.

#### **KEY WORDS:**

Identity, corruption, poverty, injustice, domination, subaltern, injustice.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* received much acclaim as well as criticism when it bagged the Man Booker Prize 2008. Set in backdrop of the economic boom in India, the fiction is an intuitive study in subaltern quest wrought about by the great chasm that exists between the haves and have-nots. As Adiga himself, has said that well, this is the reality for a lot of Indian people and it's important that it gets written about, rather than just hearing about the five percent of people in my country who are doing well.. At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me to highlight the brutal injustices of society. The fiction is an answer to subaltern quest of the oppressed, expressed in a violent manner, pointing to a very dangerous trend, leading to crime and destruction. The fictionist powerfully dwells on the theme through the metaphor of rooster coop. This paper attempts to apply the concept of subaltern in broad manner.

Subaltern theory asserts that norms are established by those in power and imposed on the "other" who has had no voice because of race, class, or gender. Subaltern usually refers to persons who

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are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure. It was Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) the Italian Marxist and theoretician who introduced the term Subaltern meaning inferior status, quality, or importance. "Subaltern" is used in postcolonial theory in a general sense, referring to marginalized groups and the lower classes or a person rendered without agency by his or her social status. But critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak subscribes to the term more specifically.

In the South Asian context the term "subaltern" may be applied to those groups that have been subordinated in terms of class, caste, age, gender, office and the like. Gramsci considered the subaltern as a historically determined category that exists within particular historical, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts. Homi Bhabha emphasizes the importance of social power Relations in his working definition of "subaltern" groups as oppressed, minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group: subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power (Morton 96\_97). He refers to the signifier effects of the dominant discourse. He focuses on the fact that ideas are expressed in the dominant discourse, in which the oppressed and colonized are not well versed and not skilled at expressing their validity claims.

Hence, the claims of the oppressed are often expressed in poor imitation of the master discourse. And they are not given good faith hearing by those skilled in the use of the dominant discourse. The question that puzzles one is why do the subaltern groups continue to remain perpetually the wanted? The elite groups have "remained dominant devoid of the will and ability to transform society, while the counterthrust from subaltern groups was perpetually thwarted or subalterned by elite domination" (207-8).

Dipesh Chakrabarty has tried to clarify some of the Charges Levelled against Subaltern Studies being reduced to class relations of binary division of society into "elite" and "subaltern":

*...the word "subaltern" in Subaltern Studies ...refers to the Specific Studies... refers to the Specific nature of class relationships in India, where, at almost all levels, are subsumed in the relations of domination and subordination between members of the elite and subaltern classes... "the language of India overlaps with the language of citizen-politics only in the minority of instances. (Chakrabarty 375)*

Balram Halwai, gives vent to his subaltern as a megalomaniac by murdering his boss and by confessing his rising to be an entrepreneur in the call centre hub of Bangalore. He calls his life's Story "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian" (10). He has written his story as a seven-part letter to the Chinese premier Wen Jiabao "From the Desk of The White Tiger or A Thinking Man also And an entrepreneur and Living in the world's centre of technology and outsourcing or Electronic City" , in which Balram Confesses his guilt and his ambition, his emergence from the world of "Darkness" to the world of "Light" of cities which is a world of servants and masters: from brutal poverty and deprivation to successful entrepreneurship. His cynicism and deep rooted-immoral ways are dangerous trends leading to anarchy in our society. The novel exposes Indian democracy, injustice and entrepreneurship.

Adiga has written the novel giving expression of his voice, searching for identity: The novel is written in "voice" in Balram's voice and not in mine. "Some of the things that he is confused by or angry about are changes in India that I approve some of the other things he is unhappy about like corruption is easier for me to identify with. When talking to many men whom I met in India, I found a sense of rage,

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often suppressed for years and years that would burst out when they finally met someone they could talk to Balram's anger is not an anger that the reader should participate in entirely. It can seem at times like the rage you might feel if you were in Balram's place but at other times you should feel troubled by it, certainly" (54).

The novel is labelled an angry exposure of injustice and power: But Tiger isn't about race or caste in India. It's about the vast economic inequality between the poor and the wealthy elite. The narrator is an Indian entrepreneur detailing his rise to power. His India is a merciless, corrupt Darwinian jungle where only the ruthless survive. Adiga's protagonist emerges from his experience of poverty and corruption in India.

The two sides of Indian remains polarised as the rich becoming richer and the misery of the poor continuing to grow rapidly. His misery is recalled when he went as a child with his mother's body for final rites at the banks of Ganges. Nothing has changed for the better, except more of misery. His village of Laxmangarph in the district of Gaya has also the portion beside the river Ganges and the Lord Buddha is said to have walked past the village.

Adiga pinpoints the subaltern quest expressed by the old man to live like a human being. The fictionist dwells on the pathetic situation of education in the villages, meant to uplift the poorest of the poor. Balram recounts: " There was supposed to be free food at my school a government programme gave every boy three roits yellow daal, and pickle at lunchtime. But we never saw roits or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why; the school teacher had stolen our lunch money. The teacher had a legitimate excuse to steal the money he said he had not been paid his salary in six months" (33).

Corruption from the top government levels to the teacher kept the poor like Balram helpless tools in the hands of the rich and the powerful. The fictionist points the utter failure of the government agencies at the very core of creating subaltern groups and people like Balram. The irony surrounding the governmental educational system is portrayed through the character of the inspector of schools who comes to inspect Balram's school. He finds everything in the school: no duster, no chairs, and no uniforms for children. He funds threatening the teachers. Being the smartest in the class, Balram is made to read four sentences: " We live in a glorious land. The Lord Buddha received his enlightenment in this land. The River Ganges gives life to our pants and our pants and our animals and our people. We are grateful to God that we were born in this land" (34).

Desiring to live like a man and to fulfil his father's dream, he finally came to Delhi. It was one of the feudal lords who took him to Delhi, where he began to experience the world of light. He learned driving and was employed as a chauffeur by Mr.Ashok at Dhanbad. After his father's death it was Kishan who took care of him. Whatever money he got, he sent home to Granny.

While in Delhi, Balram experiences the two kinds of India with those who are eaten and those who eat, prey and predators. Balram decides he want to be an eater someone with a big belly, and the novel tracks the way in which this ambition plays out. He began to explain his destiny to be an underdog in society. He wondered why his father was not sweet maker, but a rickshaw-puller. His reminisces on the mystery of life in India where the subaltern suffers like in a zoo. "Everyone in his place, everyone happy. Goldsmiths here, Cowherds here, Landlords there. The untouchable cleaned faeces" (63). Such is the lot of the subaltern groups that Balram represents. He further sums up ironically the destiny of India under caste system which finally leads practically into two castes "Men with Big bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat-or get eaten up" (64).

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Balram was taunted by the old man Stork who said that his employees were from the top caste. He didn't mind two people from the bottom caste serving him like Balram. He didn't mind the insult as his new masters, Mr. Ashok. Mukesh his brother and Stock were better than most big bellied ones. He got enough food in the house with special chicken dishes on Sundays. He never ever relished such meals in his life. This is another shade of the Subaltern groups who have apparent sufficiency in the hands of the filthy rich. Besides driving, Balram had to heat water for the old man, place his feet in it and message whenever he wanted it. He makes his comments on politicians and the corruption that is perpetrated through recurrent elections.

While in Delhi, Balram used to observe thousands of people on the roads, coming from the darkness with the hope of a better life. He pitied them with their emaciated and famished looks. It made him recollect his own upbringing in poverty. But he never cared about their lot as he was bothered only about his misery and to make a living for himself. This is another aspect of the subaltern concern which makes people in extreme poverty to be self-absorbed. His slavish life meant he had to go wherever his masters went. He went to the shopping mall with Mr. Ashok, Mukhesh Sir and Pinky Madam , to carry their purchase . After reaching them home, he helped in the apartment, doing the cleaning around. After everything was done he stood with folded hands until he was told to go home and return the following morning at eight a.m.

The key metaphor in the novel is of the Rooster Coop. Balram is caged like the chickens in the rooster coop. He, being a white tiger, has to break out of the cage to freedom. Go to Old Delhi... and look at the way they keep chickens there in market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages... 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 very same thing is done with human beings in this country (173-74).

The protagonist confirms that the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. This is a paradox and a mystery of in where subaltern people often continue to be slavish. "Because Indians are the world's most honest people No. It's because ninety nine percent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop like those poor guys in the poultry market. The Rooster Coop doesn't always work with the miniscule sums of money. Don't test your chauffeur with a rupee coin or two he may well steal that much. But leave a million dollars in front of a servant and he won't touch a penny Masters Trust their servants with diamonds in this country. .... Why doesn't that servant take the suitcase full of diamonds? He is no Gandhi, he is human, and he is in the rooster coop nature (175-77).

Adiga speaks out his mind why he wrote the novel : as he wanted to challenge this idea that India is the world's greatest democracy. It may be so in an objective sense, but on the ground, the poor have such little power. He wanted something that would provoke and annoy people. The servant- master system implied two things, One is that the servants were far poorer than the rich a servant had no possibility of ever catching up to the master. And secondly, he had access to the master's money, the master's physical person. Yet crime rates in India were very low, what was stopping a poor man from taking to the crime that occurred in Venezuela or the South Africa? Two things were needed to divide a conscious ideology of resentment. But there was no resentment in India. The poor just assumed that the rich were a fact of life. For them, getting angry at the rich is like getting angry at the heat. But he thought that were seeing what he believed was a class based resentment for the firsttime.

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The novel exposes the ferocious Ness of the man who after bloodletting through murder Will turn out to be a man-eater himself. What guarantees if he will not commit for reasons of rivalry in his entrepreneurial world of cut-throat competition. Revenge murder is no solution to bring about social justice. Subscribing to his principle of taking law into his own hands, will lead only to the anarchy and escalation of violence. Excessive economic inequalities and unwarranted delay in applying the remedies for them are often the causes of such dissention. Besides, quest for power and total disregard for human rights helps escalate violence and strife among men. Remedial measures have to be taken by government and law makers to prevent rampant corruption and oppression of the downtrodden. Let not the law of the jungle prevail as Adiga has proven through his protagonist. Mere anarchy and chaos will prevail if an evil is hatched to counter another evil.

The narrative is a reflection of contemporary India, calling attention to social justice in the wake of economic prosperity. It is a novel about the emerging new India which is pivoted on the great divide between the haves and have-nots with moral implications. It is enveloped in Balram's struggle to establish his identity as an individual. However, The White Tiger should make every right-thinking citizen to read the signs of the times and law-enforcing agencies keep ignoring the Cry of the subaltern poor and the marginalized in society, such groups will continue to fight for their rights and liberate themselves from crushing injustices perpetrated by the rich and the powerful, taking law into their own hands. The fictionist very poignantly depicts social injustice and class struggle that exists in India, through its anti-hero Balram Halwai, representing a subaltern section of society. The fictionist has been very articulate in his social criticism, raising issues that need immediate attention, lest injustice is perpetrated, leading to escalation of violence, crime and evils of all magnitudes.

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