



**The Voices of Dissent: A Critical Reading of Aravind  
Adiga's *The White Tiger***

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**Abstract**

**Aim:** *The paper is a modest attempt to analyze the novel as an expression of dissent, pain and disgust raised from the marginalized section of the society. As a matter of fact, India is a country with great economic disparity where a large population is extremely poor and compelled to live a life of hand-to-mouth existence. They are considered as a being of no importance. Inevitably, they are*

*easily silenced and subtly exploited by the elites for their pursuit of power in the society. So, these marginalized people need to awake, arise or they would forever remain unheard. An Indo-Australian writer Aravind Adiga in his debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008) has brought to light such a distinct and repressed voice of a subaltern in the neocolonial Indian society. The paper will also critically examine the way protagonist, Balram resists and emancipate from 'darkness'.*

**Methodology and Approach:** *The study is based on the novel *The White Tiger* (2008) by Aravind Adiga as a primary text. It has employed the postcolonial approach to dissect the text.*

**Outcome:** *The novel satirizes the globalizing economy which is echoing the colonized era when the country was under the control of foreigners exploiting the countrymen but in the times of globalization the system is poorly structured which is making the elites exploiting their own countrymen. The novel looks at the altered version of the subaltern who is voicing his subjugation when he was a 'slave' and in one or the other way, is 'writing-back' to circumvent his suppression during his life in the 'rooster-coop'.*

**Conclusion and Suggestion:** *The paper concludes with the idea that the theme of marginalization has been the epicenter of the Postcolonial studies. In the decolonized nation like India, rich has occupied the center, as the colonizer and poor has been relegated to the margins of the society as the colonized. This neglected and trampled stratum of the society does not possess any identity of their own and their voice of pains and agony is rarely heard. And even if one tries to resist and break the rooster coop, then it is perhaps impossible to remain unaffected from the vicious circle of corruption in a globalized economy.*

**Keywords:** Marginalized, Darkness, Voice of Dissent, Subaltern, Colonized

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The theme of marginalization has been an epicenter of Postcolonial studies since its inception. The postcolonial scholarship not only traces the historical struggle of the former colonies to dismantle the remains of the colonial regime but also maps out the plight of the marginalized in the decolonized nation. It traces the predicament, suffering, pain and voice of the subjugated to register the resistance against the hegemony of the favored class of the society. And by subscribing to the fluidity of language the postcolonial studies tend “to disrupt existing hierarchies which create binary relations of domination and subordination” (Gates 151). Undeniably since the beginning of human civilization, there had been subjugation of one race(black) by another(white) in form of ‘slavery’, one human being(female) by another(male) through patriarchy and one country by another by colonization and this contemptible legacy has been carried by the elites in contemporary times. This subjugated and compelling stratum of the society comprises of the poor, ‘the other’, blacks, diseased, women, dalits, homosexuals and minorities. These are the beleaguered people meant for the fringes and so denied the substantial opportunities easily available to the central section of the society. Their existence, human rights and identity are easily annihilated and violated by the unchallenged authorities and the elite’s as their plights are hardly given a voice. The hegemony of the elite class, has a long history of marginalizing

the underprivileged ones, was carried by slavery, apartheid system, holocaust and colonization, and now by indirect forces of imperialism and globalization. The extension of the postcolonial nations into the globalized economy has paved the way for oppressing and exploiting the poor working class in myriad ways. The paper attempts to study the emerging voice from the margin of the decolonized and globalized India. The novel portrays a subaltern named Balram who is raised from the periphery. It delineates complex issues like corruption, poverty, identity and plights of marginalized sections of the society. The novel recounts the experiences of a poor, 'half-baked', a man from the margins, his life from an inevitable birth in 'darkness', survival as a chauffeur and then his departure from darkness to light as an entrepreneur. Balram's narrative serves as a way to look at his former self for self-analysis and self-pity.

The contemporary Indian Writing in English as an integral part of postcolonial studies represents the political, socio-economic and cultural scene of contemporary India. In the post-colonial era, issues of the marginalized are the nucleus of literary imagination and thought. Famous postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak* concretizes the basis of such thoughts. Its main attempt is to vent the subaltern consciousness in the entirety of the world so they would no longer remain unheard. The voice from the margins needs to be heard to bring visible changes in the lives living on the fringes of society. They are also important yet ignored segment of our society. So by writing on a subaltern in the globalized era, Adiga attempted to address the socio-political and economic issues and voiced the silenced and oppressed marginal and destitute individuals and community:

Contemporary writers like Indira Sinha, Vikas Swarup, Kiran Desai and Arvind Adiga have offered pictures of the country that, instead of suffering from nationalistic illusions, choose to focus on

the darker side of the neoliberal turn, the rupture of the social fabric by class and caste divisions, the sufferings of the indigent majority and the failure of the postcolonial state (Dwivedi and Lau 73).

Aravind Adiga is one of the major writers of contemporary Indian writings in English. He has cemented his reputation as a writer who possesses social awareness and consciousness by articulating and voicing a fictional marginalized villager Balram Halwai, in his maiden work *The White Tiger*. *The White Tiger* (2008), winner of the Man Booker Prize of the same year, is set against the backdrop of modern India where Adiga attempts to expose the underbelly of its development. It traces the plight of a subaltern in a newly globalized nation like India and how the psyche and innocence of a subaltern is marred in a society corrupted by elites. It is a picaresque novel in epistolary form brimmed with irony and satire which captures the journey of a naïve, poor village boy Balram Halwai from 'darkness' into a well-established entrepreneur in the 'light'. The novel represents the great polarization between the rich and poor, light and dark India, master and slave in the contemporary globalized milieu. Of all the marginalized, the section being denied fundamental rights and identity are regarded as the most deprived section of the society. John Burdett (author of *Bangkok 8*) in praise of the novel says, "This is the authentic voice of the Third World, like you've never heard it before".

The disparity of income between rich and poor is one of the major reasons for the plight of the poor. This gap remained unnoticed until the late eighteenth century when the greater portion of the world was under the dominion of the 'Empire'. After the historical event of independence, the decolonized nation like India stuck in the loop of extractive political and financial institutions, which are structured in such a way that they drove power towards the elite class of the

society which is making poor even poorer. “The extremely wealthy people of Light India oppress the extremely poor people of Dark India to such a degree that those in the Darkness are not even conscious of their own oppression.” (litcharts)

The voice from the margins always was, has been and will continue to remain silenced and unheard unless and until the hegemonic power structure and the chain of corruption pervades in the society. The economic disparity which is at the heart of the novel posits various questions on the world’s fastest-growing economy, India. In the decolonized setup like India, the rich have occupied the center, as the colonizers and the poor belong to the periphery as colonized so they do not possess any distinct place in the society. Shortcomings of the subaltern are that “Their helpless addiction to authoritarian traditionalism as ex-colonial societies” (O’Houlton 109) which broadens the ways of their suppression. So they need to *awake, arise* or they would remain forever be exploited and silenced:

In India the colonial mind thought of Indian peasants as simple, ignorant, exploited by landlords, traders and moneylenders, respectful of authority, grateful to those in power who cared for and protected them, but also volatile in temperament, superstitious and often fanatical, easily aroused by agitators and troublemakers from among the Indian elite who wanted to use them for their narrow political designs” (Chatterjee 9).

Since the process of globalization has blurred the transnational boundaries and opened numerous gateways for free flow of ideas, thoughts, employment, resources but the power which governs these forces (ab)uses the power by accumulating and driving a great portion of the wealth to the elites. This in turn paves way for corruption and prompts exploitation of the regular working class. This consequently creates great income disparity and insecurity and employment

uncertainties which further hinders the individual and national identity of those living on margins and prompts them to pick corrupt and illegal practices like Balram did to rise from a life of a slave to a master. Since his childhood he has been witnessing the poor struggling for their daily bread whereas the life in the light is though crooked yet comfortable.

The whole novel is in first-person narration capturing the voice of pain, suffering and disgust which is enough to fill a man's heart to opt for corrupt practices to rise from 'darkness'. Balram becomes the mouthpiece of the author who himself have observed the underbelly of globalized India as a journalist. But choosing a protagonist from the margin, who wrote about his life, is primarily a way to give voice to the subaltern. Balram is not any conventional subaltern who remains unheard throughout the life but he urges to awake, arise or else he would forever be unheard like the rest. Though it is a herculean and (im)possible task to treat centuries-old ills of society as Balram says "the diseases of the poor can never get treated" (Adiga 237). The age-old process of silencing the weak is made possible through a series of narratives constructed upon the difference, the hierarchy of one race and the location of bodies. The actual predicament is that the instruments of subjugation of the marginalized are unfortunately so normalized and embedded in their psyche that makes the whole process of marginalization universal and acceptable. As Balram says that people in 'darkness' never raise their voices even after realizing that they would be the next to be slaughtered under the feet of the rich of this polarized system. "They see the organs of their brothers around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop" (Adiga 173).

Undoubtedly all humans are born equal but the polarization based on class, caste, race and gender has engendered innumerable strife where the powerful always tries to find ways to subjugate the weak. The way the protagonist

is subjugated and exploited is enough to turn him into a malignant soul. The exasperated but ambitious underdog Balram no longer finds himself comfortable with his role as a servant. Slowly he loses all sympathetic touch with his family and the master. And the thoughts of committing master Ashok's murder begin to cross his mind. He asserts "I am a man of action, sir" (Adiga 12)

The novel looks at the altered version of the subaltern who is voicing his subjugation when he was a 'slave' and in one or the other way, is 'writing-back' to circumvent his suppression during his life in the 'rooster-coop'. Adiga's language and style of presenting the grim reality of the decolonized and newly globalized India captivated both critics and ordinary readers all over the world. Balram is not any conventional subaltern because he learns strategies of life just by eavesdropping, having access to the new tools of information and technology and the ability to 'speak'. The subaltern figure in Adiga's novel uses the tools of globalization and deterritorialization to express the changing position of the subaltern in global capitalism. The result is, in Mukherjee's analysis, that globalization has at least created a space from which the literary market is open to the fictional native subaltern voice. (153)

The frailty of subalterns' existence is that they are as unrecognized and neglected as any stray dog on the road. And the irony is that the pets of the rich live better life than the marginalized ones as Balram asserts, "The rich expect their dogs to be treated like humans, you see—they expect their dogs to be pampered, and walked, and petted, and even washed!" (Adiga 78). Balram is ordered to do so with great care as the Nepali guy admonish him "They're worth more than you are!" (78). Another instance from the novel which shows the deplorability of being a subaltern when Balram's master's drunk wife run the Honda City car over a subaltern child and more pitiable is their reaction. They assume it to be a small black thing' or 'a dog' which disturbs Balram for a



moment as he could sense the agony of that poor child but has to follow Ashok's order to run away from the spot. The subjugation of the marginalized reaches its peak when Balram is forced to take responsibility for the accident to save his master. This horrendous episode of Balram's life indicates that those who left to live on the margins of society are truly in dire need of providing awareness, education and security. Such ignorance of a particular class and silencing them shows that how the poor subaltern's life is worthless in comparison to the rich. As Judith Butler puts it, "certain lives are perceived as lives while others, though apparently living, fail to assume perceptual form as such" and the "versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remain ungrievable" (24) and suffers throughout their life.

Balram in his (imaginary) letter to the Chinese Mr. Premier, also narrates the condition of India, the world's largest democracy where a section of society is still colonized and ruled by the social elites. He asserts that the elites have snatched the constitutional right to vote from them by selling their 'fingerprints' in exchange for a huge price from the socialist Party. Such is the "continuation of colonialism through other forms, especially by the postcolonial elites" (Nayar 70). Balram and other poor villagers like him are not aware of this peculiar way of exploitation so when ordered they all came and gathered in a school on the day of voting to register them as voters but on the papers. They are the disenfranchised and alienated part of their country without knowing it. He says "I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth", which confirms their innocent unawareness (Adiga 102).

We must try to give voice to the unvoiced and powerless section of the society so that the potential of each individual can be fully utilized not destroyed like that of Balram. The predicament is "The newly independent nation-state makes available the fruits of liberation only selectively and unevenly: the

dismantling of colonial rule did not automatically bring about changes for the better in the status of women, the working class or the peasantry in most colonized countries” (Loomba 1106). This is the reason for the growing economic disparity between the rich and the poor. The favoring of a particular class and silencing of the ‘other’ most often restricts the dispersion of legitimate rights and leaving the poor increasingly poorer.

The way of voicing one’s suffering and emancipation chosen by Balram is not meant to be appreciated or neglected but critically analysed. Balram employs different ways as a reimbursement to the poor people who have been exploited by elites since years. “He positions his employer as the enemy who is stealing the wealth of the country that should be distributed more equally [...]. Mishra suggests that “instead of applying recognized methods for renegotiating pay and conditions of employment, such as political protest and union organization” (152), Balram opts for the road less travelled by any conventional subaltern and that is what brings all the difference in his life. He chooses corrupt means to meet the right ends. As his “entrepreneurship is based on a criminal acquisition of an unequal share of the country’s wealth” (152).

Throughout the novel, Balram made comments on his act of murdering in a form of confession and sometimes as a justification. The nation has gained independence for more than seven decades but a segment of society is struggling to free themselves from caste, class, religion and gender-based exploitation and discrimination. “People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else – from the jungles, from the mountains, from China, from Pakistan. That will never happen” (304). So, he took an exceptional and dramatic step which enables him to move from the ‘darkness’ to the ‘light’. He has the potential to accomplish great things in life but his birth and treatment as a poor deprived him of various opportunities & achievements. He

was given the title of ‘white tiger’ for being an extraordinary child during his school but due to the lack of sufficient resources, responsibilities of his family and the circumstances forced him to leave the school. He was not a born criminal but his ambitions and deeply wounded psyche compels him to opt for the corrupt means to achieve success. It would not be wrong to assert that after committing the murder his conscience kept on reminding him that he is a sinner as he heard his conscience voice whispering to him “But your heart has become even blacker than that, Munna” (265). Even after achieving a status of a well-known entrepreneur in ‘light’ (in Bangalore), he is somewhere not satisfied because his soul has been tainted with this crime as he asserts, “True, there was the matter of murder – which is a wrong thing to do, no question about it. It has darkened my soul. All the skin-whitening creams sold in the markets of India won’t clean my hands again” (318). These lines resonate the guilt-ridden lady Macbeth who after killing the king was utterly restless. He changes his destiny like Macbeth but is never caught by the police which shows the weakness of the system in the developing economy which engenders more crimes as such.

Financial and social inequality is the nucleus of the whole narrative of the novel. The elite’s illegal and fraudulent business practices and tax evasion are exposed through Ashok and his family’s corrupt activities. This, in turn, create two dichotomous destinies in the social fabric of Modern India i.e., “eat—or get eaten up”. Being a subaltern Balram has inevitable chances of “get eaten up” so to subvert his destiny he begins to take up unethical means to make money like cheating his master, siphoning his master’s petrol etc. Soon he feels like receiving reimbursement for the illegal practices of the rich which ultimately ruins the poor consequently transformed his sense of guilt into a sense of comfort, “The more I stole from him, the more I realized how much he had stolen from me” (Adiga 231). “Shankar Gopalkrishnan, an Indian political economist, has questioned

Adiga's representation of the Indian subaltern, suggesting that he reduces the class to a group of 'oppressed crazies' (152). The act of slaughtering the master Ashok by the servant Balram is not the result of his insane instinct but the outburst of the deeply wounded psyche of a slave who is looking for the ultimate method of emancipation in a post-liberated society. Though he achieved the goal of having a big bank balance and luxurious life like the rich he lacks the family whom he assumes dead, might be alive.

The novel satirizes the globalizing economy which is echoing the colonized era when the country was under the control of foreigners exploiting the countrymen but in the times of globalization the system is poorly structured which is making the elites exploiting their own countrymen. And, so even the government is trying to bridge the gap between the two, the government officials executing the policies give birth to the never-ending vicious cycle of corruption which makes the government hospitals' doctors visiting and curing the poor on papers, aids are given to government schools is most often eaten up by the intermediaries, subalterns are becoming voters but on papers, the rich are easily multiplying their illegal businesses but the poor is dying an unknown death. So, "In a country where the rules are stacked so overwhelmingly against the poor, Balram comes to believe that to create a better life and "break out of the Rooster Coop," one must be willing to sacrifice everything, including attachment to traditional ideas of good versus bad and even one's family" (Litcharts). Experiencing an underprivileged life because of the corrupt practices of the elites provoked Balram to remove everything which is lying as a barrier in the way of realizing his dreams and for that he believes "one murder was enough" (Adiga 318). Adiga has very finely and accurately captured the agony and desperate struggles of the deprived people who rise and dissent against the ills of the society yet failed to remain unaffected from it.

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