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# Subalternity, Globalization and Balram Halwai

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to make a critical analysis of the subaltern consciousness of Balram Halwai, the protagonist in Aravind Adiga's critically acclaimed but controversial novel *The White Tiger* which won the Booker Prize for the author. Although one does not come to know about Balram's caste, the author tells us that he is the son of a rickshaw puller, Vikram Halwai.

Balram begins at the very bottom, without even a proper name; his family calls him only "Munna", or "boy." Moreover, on the basis of the surrounding he lives in, the kind of job he does, the kind of vocabulary and short and crudely constructed sentences he uses, he clearly appears to be a member of the subaltern class. The protagonist of the novel, Balram learns the success mantra of successful entrepreneurship in the corruptatmosphere of the post-globalization India and goes on to fearlessly kill his employer, Mr. Ashok. He is a ruthless product of a ruthless age. He stands for the breeding discontent and aggression in the underbelly of India under globalization. The economic divide being created by globalizationthreatens the social fabric of India unless a more humane model of progress is adopted. The proposed paper would seek to closely investigate this aspect of the protagonist's character.

**Keywords**: Globalization, Discontent, Imbalanced economy, Ruthlessness, Aggression, New subaltern class, Humane model of progress.

*The White Tiger* by Arvind Adiga is a stinging attack on the new India developing under globalization – 'an acidic satire on modern India', as Damian Whitworth calls it. No wonder the book has been received with considerable antagonism in India as it holds a mirror to realities we refuse to acknowledge. As Neel Mukherjee wrote in The Sunday Telegraph – 'Blazingly savage and brilliant……an excoriating piece of work, relentless in its stripping away of the veneer of India Rising to expose its rotting heart'. Mohsin Hamid regards the novel 'compelling, angry and darkly humorous' (hindu.com). A lot of novelists in India, however, have not been kind to Adiga. It was surprising to read the remarks of Shashi Deshpande, a reputed novelist – "But which Indian will refuse to acknowledge the realities Adiga speaks of! In fact, the complaint of many readers has

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been: what is he telling us that we do not know?" (hindu.com) May be we are in the know of the realities Adiga is trying to focus but only an Adiga could have said this, for only a writer having intellectual honesty can say the unsayable. When we talk of Eliot's poetry presenting truth in all its nakedness, why can't Adiga do it?

Moreover, as Adiga himself responds to such charges, "In the 19th century the great European writers, Dickens and Balzac and Flaubert, were savagely critical of the societies they lived in. One of the things the arts should do is slap the middle class in the face. This is essential as a country rises to great power status. It is not that you are deriding the country. It is part of being self-reflective as a society" (timesonline.co.uk). It is indeed remarkable to note that in spite of all savageness of attack Adiga takes a less pessimistic view of India's economic boom under globalization than Arundhati Roy.

In fact, he believes that India "has a potential for a very unique destiny. This question of India's rise to global position is one that is very key to my sense of what it is I am doing as a writer. I am not saying I am opposed to it. I am saying I am ambivalent about it. India as a power can mean something different for different people. What I always thought it meant was a time when India wouldn't have poor people. But for a lot of people what it means is a sense of belligerence, which I think is disturbing" (timesonline.co.uk).

The theme of the novel, to put it in the words of the protagonist Balram Halwai, is to portray India which has grown into "two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness (14). While addressing Mr. Jiabo, the Chinese premier, Balram Halwai says, "No!- Mr Jiabo! I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faecas, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acid" (15), none can deny the sarcasm, but it must also be treated as a soulful cry of concern for the environment in danger. As Vijay Nair so succinctly remarks in The Hindu, "The White Tiger is a fairy tale, albeit somewhat bloody in its orientation. The book ends with the promise of marriage for the protagonist, thereby sealing the happily-ever-after ending. So it begs reason why it has left so many compatriots foaming at the mouth. The answer may be in the deceptively simple parabolic tale Adiga weaves in a little over 300 pages. Everything about the work is designed as a wickedly subversive tool to hold a mirror to the reader, the patron of his book" (hindu.com).

The novel tells the story of Balram Halwai who hails from a small village named Laxmangarh in Bihar. He belongs to a community which lives deep in the darkness of rural India. The son of a rickshaw puller who is taken out of school as a boy and put to work in a tea shop, Balram nurses dreams of escape. He originally was named Munna as it hardly made a difference and his parents never named him. His mother might have named him, but she was too busy dying of TB. His father was too busy pulling a rickshaw, weakening himself to be claimed by the same disease" (telegraph.co.uk). A school teacher, Mr. Krishna has to name him instead; later, a local official decides on his date of birth.

In Dhanbad he learns driving as he comes to know about the high salary paid to drivers. He finally gets his chance when a rich village landlord hires him as a chauffeur for his son, Ashok and his daughter-in-law, Pinky Madam, and their two Pomeranian dogs, Cuddles and puddles. The family moves to Delhi. There, amid the cockroaches and the call centres, the 360,000,004 gods, the shopping malls, the brown envelopes and the crippling traffic jams, Balram learns about modern India, where the air is so bad that it takes ten years off a man's life unless he drives in an air-conditioned car. "With their tinted windows up, the cars of the rich go like dark eggs down the roads of Delhi. Every now and then an egg will crack open – a woman's hand, dazzling with gold bangles, stretches out of an open window, flings an empty mineral water bottle onto the road – and then the window goes up, and the egg is released"(133-34). Thus he has the feel of the India of Light and becomes worldly and ambitious.

As Balram broods over his situation he realizes that it is only through ruthlessness he can ensure an escape from servitude and suffering to the India of Light. Therefore, he decides to murder his employer, Mr. Ashok whose increasing involvement in political corruption and divorce from his wife provides Balram with an opportunity. One day as Ashok is carrying seven hundred thousand rupees in cash to bribe politicians in New Delhi, Balram murders him and flees to Bangalore with his nephew Dharam. Balram uses the loot to bribe a police commissioner and start his own transport business. He changes his name to Ashok Sharma and becomes a wealthy entrepreneur in India's new technological society thus making his entry from darkness to light.

The novel uses epistolary structure and the protagonist writes a series of letters to Chinese Premier Mr. Wen Jiabo who is planning a visit to India. Mr. Jiabo is planning to visit Bangalore to have a first-hand experience of India's technological advance. Balram wants to give him a different perspective than the official one.

> Out of respect for the love of liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man has wasted himself through buggery, cell phone usage and drug abuse, I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore (5-6).

As a matter of fact, the protagonist in this novel, Balram Halwai reminds us of the two memorable characters belonging to the Dalit class – Bakha in Anand's 1935 classic *Untouchable* who is damned to remain an outcaste despite the stirrings deep inside his soul, and Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, 1996 who is a paravan but cherishes a desire to 'relive' as a touchable. He dares to have physical relation with an upper-class woman (unthinkable to Bakha) which ultimately costs him his life.

Balram Halwai, the protagonist in Adiga's novel goes a step further and does not hesitate to kill his master (again unthinkable to Velutha) in order to become a successful entrepreneur. Therefore, one traces in these three characters a complete transformation of the Dalit character in terms of their attitude and the growing degree of aggression and protest. These three characters have arisen from 'the compulsions of life of the lower depths where the rejected in our country have been condemned to live' to use

the phrase of Anand (Anand (ed): 19). These novels are not merely literary exercises but also artistic articulations of the political and socio-economic conditions of the age in which they have been written – invaluable social documents of their time.

Of course, in *The White Tiger*, more than race or caste, it is the 'vast economic inequality between the poor and the wealthy elite' that is highlighted. The protagonist himself says, "…in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and men with Small bellies" (64). But we must keep in mind that "Balram begins at the very bottom, without so much as a name; his family calls him only "Munna", or "boy".

Discussing Balram's use of vocabulary, Sanjay Subrahmanyam wrote in *London Review of Books*, "His sentences are mostly short and crudely constructed, apparently a reflection of the fact that we're dealing with a member of the 'subaltern' classes" (lrb.co.uk).

Although not much is told about the physical charm of Balram Halwai's character, it would be interesting to have a look at how the inspector who visited his school and gave him the name of 'the white tiger' describes him: "The inspector pointed his cane straight at me. 'You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along only once in a generation?'

> I thought about it and said:
> 'The white tiger.'
> 'That's what you are, in this jungle.' (35)

Moreover, his sarcastic account of how he became a successful entrepreneur reminds us of the 'young Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* refusing to be a puppet' (usatoday.com). Balram reminds one of Heathcliff. Like Heathcliff, he is also a victim of the extreme inequality prevailing in the post-globalised world and passes sarcastic remarks on the much-hyped propaganda of prosperity in a country which still has 42% population living below poverty line. Paradoxically, however, he is the narrator of his own meteoric rise using the same contemporary formula of success, sitting in his 150 sq. ft office in Bangalore and writing letters to Mr. Jiabo, the Chinese premier, on the subject of Indian entrepreneur.

Therefore, Balram Halwai is out and out a fighter, a rebel and has the ruthlessness to survive in this world of 'Big fishes eat small fishes.' Even a glimpse into Balram's character would bring out the truth that as we move from Bakha to Velutha and from Velutha to Balram Halwai, the degree of protest and anger against the system is rising. While Bakha and Velutha fail to achieve any success against the brutal and discriminatory attitude of the society, Balram Halwai shows that he is a cunning, resourceful and ambitious citizen of that post-globalization India which is a 'merciless, corrupt Darwinian jungle where only the ruthless survive' (usatoday.com). As mentioned earlier, his vision is that of a Marxist, not of a person raising his voice against any kind of racism or casteism in India. Had Baba Saheb been alive, perhaps Balram Halwai would have written him too not to worry about annihilation of caste system.

Bullied, uneducated, underprivileged, Halwai comes from the vast rural population in which seventy percent of the nation's population still lives, often in a state of shocking deprivation. He wants to escape from the India of Darkness to the India of Light. To fight ruthlessness, he acts ruthlessly and goes on to murder his master Ashok Sir. Although he regrets that he was the nicest one in the family. This is an act which Velutha, in spite of all his heroics, would not have done, not only because of his non-violent thinking but also because he would not have sufficient courage to do this as he is not the product of the post-globalized India.

Balram considers himself an entrepreneur and explains to Mr. Jiabo his entrepreneurial education in the very school of hard knocks. He knows that in today's world what you need is only success, no matter at what cost. He is the smartest and the most aggressive of the three characters. This tendency in him also owes to the growing consciousness in this class regarding their rights, as they are also enjoying political power from the panchayat level to the state assemblies and even up to parliament level. A new social engineering is taking place and at several places the Dalits are asserting themselves quite forcefully. As a matter of fact, they have also tasted the blood of political power and several heroes in the shape of Mayawatis and Kanshi Rams have emerged in recent past who thrive only on Dalit card. Some of the brain-washing is also being done by the Naxal and Maoist ideologies.

After all, they are also living in the world of information explosion which has its reach to the lowest level. Gone are the days when this class was ignorant and led a life of deprivation with little complaint. No wonder, characters like Balram Halwai can be found everywhere. It is absurd to say that Balram's character is unreal and merely a caricature. He is very much real and a product of this economically imbalanced system where all the doors of justice are closed on the poor. "Adiga wants us to see all this as emblematic of the new Indian tough guy, the murderous entrepreneur who will step over any number of dead bodies to get his way" (*London Review of Books*).

The digital divide which the new liberalized economy is creating at the behest of the MNCs and pro Developed World agencies like World Bank, IMF is producing characters like Balram Halwai which poses a serious threat to the social fabric of India. What Adiga has done is not to create an unreal character but to cast 'his gaze beyond the complacent smugness of middle class drawing rooms to the anger and squalor lurking in the underbelly of urban India' (*The Guardian*).

In short, my proposition is that a new subaltern group has emerged on account of the corporate centric economic policies being pursued under the umbrella of globalization. This group represents the 'India of Darkness' symbolized in the character of Balram Halwai. Of course, more than caste divide, it is the huge economic divide which is creating the same kind of chasm in the society as the caste ridden society created in the past. The oppressive structure is once again being created in the name of progress and national interest, and just as the Dalit awakening led to their rejection of the subhuman status imposed on them, this class is also asserting and gradually strengthening its position 'to subvert the authority of those who have hegemonic power' to use the expression of Homi Bhabha (Chakraborty 2).

The uprising in several states like West Bengal, Chattisgarh, Odissa, Haryana, Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and at several other places stand testimony to this new consciousness. Balram Halwai's character, therefore, voices the discontent of the new India emerging under globalization where millions of people have been made refugees in their own land. In fact, *The White Tiger* is an advance upon *The God of Small Things* in the sense that while the later deals with the traditional Dalit question, the former addresses the agony of the new subaltern class. It must be noted down that Gramsci also incorporated 'peasants, workers and other groups denied access to hegemonic power' while categorizing the subaltern. "In the post-colonial scenario, the Gramscian term 'subaltern' gets wider perspective as it refers to the third world countries and the marginalized groups in the society" (Simon 35).

It's time India awoke to this impending disaster. It is a desperate situation requiring desperate measures. However, we can hardly hope for any radical step from our MNCs educated politicians. Responsibility to sound a note of warning and awaken the masses about the evils of this lop-sided model of development also lies on writers, social scientists, social activists and all those who wish to see India grow into a peaceful, progressive and just society.

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