



ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*: A STUDY IN POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Post-colonialism is such a critical theory which studies mainly about the cultural, economic and political aspects of colonial legacy. It focuses on the impact of colonial oppression and suppression on the colonized and their homelands. It also explores colonial impacts on current cultures and societies. Aravind Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger* narrates a shocking tale about the protagonist, Balram Halwai who belongs to the underprivileged class. His acute sufferings and humiliations at the hands of his capitalist master, Ashok and his family members compel him to rebel against them. He murders Ashok, loots his money, and then plunges in Bangalore where he becomes a 'self-taught' entrepreneur. Thus, he penetrates the strict domain reserved for capitalists only and becomes the spokesperson of numerous people of the marginalized class. His extreme poverty along with some other humiliating factors stimulates him to achieve economic prosperity and freedom in his life through the way whatever possible- fair or foul. The main objective of the present paper is to study the novel through the lens of postcolonial theory. While studying the text, the research finds several issues of post-colonialism i.e., subaltern, the colonized-colonizers experience, colonial discourse, binary of 'us' and 'other', mimicry, hegemony, quest for freedom and resistance. The study observes the exploitation of the colonized at the hands of the colonizers as well as the counter attack by the protagonist of the former class. The paper also delves into the subaltern's daring journey from the periphery to the centre. Balram along with his family members, the poor people of his native village and all the people of the servant class in Dhanbad, Gurgaon and Delhi, as mentioned in the novel correspond with the colonized and Ashok and his family members including his wife Pinky Madam, his brother Mukesh, his father and uncles- the village landlords, coal mafias and the rich businessmen of the metro cities represent the colonizers.

Keywords; Post-colonialism, Subaltern, Colonizers, Colonized, Capitalists, Marginalized, Colonial Discourse, Hegemony, New Morality, Binary of 'us' and 'other', Hybridity

Postcolonial theory has earned immense popularity in studying literature in recent times. This critical approach provides us an ample space to explore several issues in literature such as marginality, hybridity, orientalism, hegemony, binary of 'us' and 'other', quest for freedom, ambivalence etc. Before we discuss post-colonialism, let's discuss colonialism first. Colonialism is mainly a cultural exploitation that helped the colonizers to expand their place not only in the colonized's homelands but also in their heart and mind. The colonizers try to establish amiable relations with the colonized people making them convinced that they are not their enemies but their friends and well-wishers, and under this fake relation they exploit the indigenous people and expand their colony. Behind this imperial expansion, colonial discourse works as a powerful tool. "Discourse, as Foucault theorizes it, is a system of statements within which the world can be known. It is the system by which dominant groups in society constitute the field of truth by imposing specific knowledge, disciplines and values upon dominated groups. As a social formation it works to constitute reality not only for the objects it appears to represent but also for the subjects who form the community on which it depends. Consequently, colonial discourse is the complex of signs and practices that organize social existence and social reproduction within colonial relationships." (Ashcroft 37) The colonizers always try to show their culture, language education and living modes superior to those of the colonized and in the whole process colonial discourse is operated as an instrument of power to oppress and suppress the colonized. The latter face several kinds of exploitations- physical, mental, psychological, cultural, social and financial. Stephen Slemon in his famous article, 'Unsettling the Empire: Resistance Theory for the Second World', writes:

Colonialism, obviously is an enormously problematic category: it is by definition transhistorical and unspecific, and it is used in relation to very different kinds of historical oppression and economic control. [Nevertheless] like the term 'patriarchy', which shares similar problems in definition,

the concept of colonialism . . . remains crucial to a critique of past and present power relations in world affairs. (Slemon 31)

Postcolonial theory seeks out the colonizer-colonized experiences in literary works written during or after the colonial period. It explores how the people from the oppressed class find themselves struggling for their survival, existence and identities in the wake of the colonial force. "Post-colonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies." (Ashcroft 168) In accordance with Peter Barry, "Postcolonial writers evoke or create a precolonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their own countries. Here, then, is the first characteristic of postcolonial criticism – an awareness of representations of the non-European as exotic or immoral 'Other'." (Barry 194) Barry's ideas remind us to the notions of Frantz Fanon who suggests two steps towards the postcolonial perspective- one is to reclaim one's own past, and the other is to erode the colonialist ideology whereby the past had been devalued. Barry's views also take us to the opinions of Edward Said on postcolonial theory. In his famous book, *Orientalism* (1978) he has discussed several issues related to this theory. He holds the view that the colonizers ruled over the colonized more due to creating their colonial discourse than using their gun power. Their discourse was so powerful and effective that the latter got easily convinced and so they were easily deceived. Said suggests the idea of binary of 'us' and 'other' representing the Occident and the Orient where the former are considered superior and the latter inferior. It is fact that under the colonial rule the indigenous culture is subjected to suffer very badly. It is often suppressed and openly denigrated in favour of elevating the colonizer's cultures and traditions. In response, postcolonial literatures seek to assert the authenticity of indigenous cultures and conventions. In such literatures the oppressed struggle against their exploitative forces and subvert the hegemonic structure in order to survive and create identities for themselves.

Now let's analyze the novel, *The White Tiger* from postcolonial perspective. The novel raises the

unspoken voice of Balram Halwai, a subaltern who comes from Laxmangarh, a remote village under Gaya District in Bihar. Subaltern studies constitute one of the main concerns in a postcolonial work. The term 'subaltern' generally refers to the people of lower class who always find themselves at the periphery far away from the centre. "Subaltern, meaning 'of inferior rank', is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. Subaltern classes may include peasants, workers and other groups denied access to 'hegemonic' power." (Ashcroft 198) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives a little different interpretation in her best known essay "Can the subaltern speak?" Here she answers the question saying "No." (Spivak 309) She holds the view that when a subaltern speaks he/she is no longer a subaltern. Actually, deprivation, loneliness, alienation, subjugation and neglect relegate a person to the status of a subaltern who cannot speak and so he is subjected to suffer silently. In the beginning of the novel, Balram is portrayed as a meek, docile and innocent village boy, but with the progress of the novel he turns fearless, bold and rebellious. His profession and his marginalized, meek existence put him in the frame of subaltern class.

Post-colonialism always hints towards the big gap between the colonizers and the colonized especially in terms of their living standards and mentalities. Adiga also depicts the two extreme sides of India – Darkness and Light. Darkness is the symbol of a place where rustic, illiterate proletarians exist with perennial poverty and servitude whereas Light is symbolized for such a place which is occupied by educated, wealthy capitalists. Darkness also stands for poverty and numerous compromises whereas Light stands for materialistic affluence and freedom of life. The protagonist's village Laxmangarh is the typical example of Darkness where poor, jobless people pass most of their time sitting idly. "Things are different in the Darkness. There, every morning, tens of thousands of young men sit in the tea shops, reading the newspaper, or lie on a charpoy humming a tune, or sit in their rooms talking to a photo of a film actress." (54) When

these people migrate to the cities like Delhi, Gurgaon, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata with the hope of getting some Light, they find Darkness even there, "Thousands of people live on the sides of the road in Delhi. They have come from the Darkness too,- you can tell by their thin bodies, filthy faces, by the animal-like way they live under the huge bridges and overpasses, making fires and washing and taking lice out of their hair while the cars roar past them." (119-120) On the other hand, the people from the privileged class live with full facilities, luxuries and affluence, and also enjoying full freedom in their lives. In Metro they can be seen "so busy partying and drinking English liquor and taking their Pomeranian dogs for walks and shampoos." (120) Thus, Balram living in Delhi feels a great gap between the rich and the poor, symbolically the 'Men with the Big Bellies' and the 'Men with the Small Bellies' and whose respective destinies are to eat and to get eaten up. Marx, a social and political thinker categorized the existing society in two functioning groups: Bourgeois and Proletariats- the exploitative and the exploited, politically the ruler and the ruled, and in accordance with Postcolonial theory, the colonizers and the colonized.

The exploitative forces representing the colonizers are the feudal landlords who are described as ferocious animals in the novel. These landlords recklessly treat with the poor villagers including Balram's family in Laxmangarh representing the colonized. Like colonial oppressors they never miss any chance to exploit and torture them. They also use colonial discourse to oblige and control them. The author describes them as Buffalo, Stork, Wild Boar and Raven. The Stork owns the river and takes his share from every fisherman and a toll from every boatman who crosses the river to Laxmangarh. The Wild Boar owns the rich agriculture land around the village who takes a big share of the daily wages of the labourers who work in his land. The Raven who owns the worst, dry land takes commission from the goatherds when they take their flocks for grazing in the hills. The Buffalo is the greediest of all who collects commission from them for using the roads. He does not leave even a rickshaw puller. These rich, oppressive landlords control the lives and shape the destinies of the poor

villagers. When the exploitation, suppression and oppression cross the limit, some of the youths turn to Naxalism. This extremist, radical group starts rebelling against the oppressive forces. The latter enjoy full support and cooperation from the local leaders, police and bureaucrats who get their shares as commission from these capitalists. Some critics view that colonialism has changed into neo-colonialism. The focus of colonialism was to exploit the people and loot the economy of the colonies. The focus has not changed even now, only the strategy has changed. P.K. Nayer rightly observes:

“Postcolonial theory is a method of interpreting, reading and critiquing the cultural practices of colonialism, where it proposes that the exercise of colonial power is also the exercise of racially determined powers of representations.” (Nayer 154)

Colonialism may also be defined as an alleged policy of exploitation of backward class by a larger power. The protagonist has to suffer tremendously due to his poverty and low caste at the hands of his master, Ashok and his family members who have emerged as European imperialist. Due to his extreme poverty, Balram has to drop off his study and work in a small tea shop. Later on his ambition and inner urge to come out of his perennial poverty takes him to Dhanbad where he becomes a driver for the Stork, one of the landlords of his village. Living in the landlord's house he has to do several other domestic works apart from the driving. His sufferings that started in the village did not mitigate in the Metro. While working as a driver to Ashok, westernized son of the Stork in Gurgaon, he has to hear abuses and rebukes, and bear tortures and torments very often. He is often insulted for small things or sometimes without any reason, just for fun. Their sufferings and humiliations remind us those of the colonized. There are such several instances. He is once badly scolded and humiliated for his unclean dresses and rustic manners by Pinky Madam, his master's wife, “You are so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, and look at your clothes! There is red paan all over your teeth; and there are red spots on your shirt. It's disgusting! Get out! Clean up the mess you have made in the kitchen and get out.”(146) He is also insulted by a Nepali servant at the Stork's

house when he handles the two Pomeranians, the white dogs in chains, the Nepali man shouted: “Don't pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!”(78) Such disparaging comments remind us one of the postcolonial concept, binary of 'us' and 'other', which hints that the colonizers are superior than the colonized. When the latter get convinced, it becomes easier for the former to rule and control, and even to expand their colony. But, here in the case of Balram the study observes the different result. The sufferings and humiliations at the hands of his capitalist master shake his inner consciousness very deeply and accelerate his rapacity to lead a life of Light.

Balram's sufferings reach at climax when he is made a sacrificial goat. When Pinky Madam in an intoxicated condition crushed a street child who dies on the very spot, the poor driver is trapped to confess the crime and sign in an affidavit in which he has to take the full responsibility for the accident. “That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects, on the night of January 23rd this year. That I then panicked and refused to fulfil my obligations to the injured party or parties by taking them to the nearest hospital emergency ward. That there were no other occupants of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.”(167) Adiga, through the story of Balram, highlights how the subaltern class is exploited by the cunning capitalist class. Here the upper class, capitalist master uses a powerful tool of colonial discourse making him convinced: “you're part of the family.”(165) The protagonist's sufferings and humiliations bear a resemblance to the colonized's tortures and torments at the hands of the colonizers in the colonial period.

In a postcolonial novel, the quest for freedom holds a significant place. *The White Tiger* too, depicts the protagonist's craving for freedom, freedom from man-made discrimination on the basis of caste and class, freedom from his perennial poverty and servitude, and freedom from the cruel clutches of the oppressive forces. Balram has to face utter humiliations due to his low caste. When he goes to the Stork in order to seek work as a driver, the landlord has great concerns for his caste and his

family background, "Are you from a top caste or bottom caste, boy?.. All our employees are top caste."(64-65). Such sheer discrimination on the basis of caste must have unconsciously implanted a seed of rebellion and protest in his mind. At the same time he may also long for social mobility through economic prosperity in his life. Enquiring about his caste shows the discriminating and subjugating attitude of the dominant class. Generally, upper class people think that the people from the top castes are better than those of bottom castes in every way. Such mean mentality of this class bears resemblance the colonizer's attitudes towards the colonized.

The protagonist living in Metropolitan cities-Delhi and Gurgaon develops a New Morality. This new code of conduct allows him to work in his favour. It permits him to cheat them who are themselves big cheats and hence he feels proud while cheating his master. He often siphons petrol, carries passengers when he is alone and produces fake bills for repairing the car. And it is his New Morality that emboldens him to murder his master, Ashok and take away his fat money. And after the crime, he has no sign of guilt on his face: "I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat."(320) Instead, he piously claims: "I am in the Light now."(14) For him, Light means economic prosperity and freedom of life. Now there is no master to rule over him, he himself becomes a master for several others by launching a taxi business, providing vehicles service to the call centres in Bangalore. He calls himself a 'self-taught' entrepreneur. Now he is not struggling like a subaltern at the periphery, but exists like a resourceful capitalist at the centre. His strong counter response corresponds with the resistance on the part of the colonized.

In postcolonial works generally protagonists are subjected to suffer professionally, socially, culturally and financially at the hands of their exploitative capitalist master, and when such sufferings extend to the extreme level, they try hard to make displacement from the periphery to the centre. In Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* too, the protagonist Balram Halwai gets severe sufferings and humiliations at the hands of the feudal landlords

symbolizing exploitative and subjugating forces. His relations with his masters also symbolize the relation between the colonizers and the colonized in the colonial period. His torturous situations boost the spirit of revolt and resistance against his master. He becomes successful in getting Light in life penetrating the age-old restricted domain for subalterns. Thus, the present paper observes several issues of post-colonialism including the oppressive and suppressive forces in the form of feudal landlords, master- servant relationship, and finally, the protagonist's daring journey from the periphery to the centre.

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