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Politics, Subaltern Issues and the Myth of New India: A Study on Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Globalization has pervaded its ominous influence in our civilization by increasing disparities between the rich and the poor. It has introduced a new game of politics where the poor continue to be the victims and are always oppressed by the rich. This article endeavours to analyse Aravind Adiga's Booker prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) through the lens of politics, subaltern issues and theories of poverty. Balaram Halwai, the central protagonist of the novel, is the representative of the subaltern who initially remains oppressed, marginalized or voiceless but his attempts to climb the ladder of success at the cost of the lives of his employer makes him unique among the 'rooster coops'. He is the voice among the voiceless, a subaltern who is gradually accessing power. This paper provokes an insight into plights and miseries of rural and urban subaltern people and how the politics of new India still remains a myth to Indians.

Keywords: Globalization, Subaltern, New India, the White Tiger.

Introduction:

Globalization has endowed us a technocratic civilization, a modern and luxurious lifestyle, but it has pervaded its ominous influence in our society by increasing disparities between the rich and the poor. Rich are getting richer everyday and poor are facing the conditions of hands to mouth (Bisai, 2016). Population is increasing in such an unprecedented rate that getting employment for every individual is becoming difficult, which is ushering the rate of unemployment day by day. According to CMIE report (2018), approximate 31 million unemployed are seeking jobs in India. This unemployment rate is increasing steadily and

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significantly in the Post-Covid period. According to Forbes India report, the unemployment rate was 5.41 % in the year 2008 whereas in 2023, it was 8.003%. The CMIE report (2023) also has stated that the unemployment rate among young people aged between 20 and 30 had registered an increase in the Oct-Dec quarter of 2023. Youths are quite frustrated due to less job opportunities and increasing family pressures. Most of them are working with low salary and leading miserable lives. Over two-thirds of the country's blue-collared employees earn less than Rs 15,000 per month, which is below the minimum wage set by the Central Pay Commission, a report said. Many among them are pursuing professions which do not suit their interests. The youths who are underpaid are getting frustrated and stressed. Some of them are committing suicide (Bisai & Chaudhary, 2017) while some others are committing crimes.

Politics and the Myth of 'A New India'

In this scenario, the political parties take advantages by making bundles of fake promises to convince the unemployed youth and try to secure the vote banks. They promise 'A New India' with lots of job opportunities, development and new social schemes. But on ascending to power, the ministers indulge themselves in endless corruptions due to which the common people continue to remain frustrated and jobless as they were before. The opponent party rants over the existing government for its failure and when in turn they come into the power, they too continue the same. This blame game continues and the politics of 'A New India' becomes the only propaganda for the political parties while the concept of 'A New India' still remains a dream to the common mass. The common people wait for "Ache Din" (good days), but like Bekett's Godot, it never arrives. Instead, what come upon the common employee are the burden of tax and usurping price of daily commodities. The farmers are not getting the fair price of their crops and agitating continuously in several states. The existing governments from various states always boasts of the 'Bikash' or 'Unnanyan' (developments) they have done, but most of these developments are not visible to the eyes of common people. The development only reflects in the accounts of political leaders when they file their nominations to the Election Commission before the votes.

The Double Divide

This kind of politics has divided the whole population into two categories – the oppressor and the oppressed, rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots. The booker prize winning novel "The White Tiger" immaculately depicts the picture of greed of the oppressors and the heart rendering miseries of the poor, the oppressed and the subalterns.

Spivak (2005) says "subalternity is a position without identity". Ranjit Guha explains subaltern is a "name for the general attribute of subordination (…) whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (1988, p. 35). Dhakal (2016) argues that subaltern refers to any group or persons of inferior rank, position and status. Spivok (2004) claims subaltern are those people who are "removed from the lines of social mobility". Subalterns are the people on whom the hegemonic power is enforced by the elites to create a difference in power positions of the society. The elite class has created this gap intentionally so that they can exercise their power on the poor.

Aravind Adiga's "The White Tiger", the epistolary novel deals with some phrases which clearly depict the double divide (the distinction between rich and poor) in our society – 'an India of Light, and an India of Darkness' (14), 'Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies' (p. 64), 'eat- or get eaten up' (p. 64). Adiga has also used animal imageries to describe the double divide between rich and poor. The imageries of donkey, rooster, monkey and parrots in a cage have been used to describe the poor who are subjugated or subaltern in our society and the imageries of wild bear, the stork, the buffalo and the raven have been used to describe the savage and wild landlords who are both destructive as well as bestial. The life of Balaram

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is often compared to animals such as pig, donkey etc. These animal imageries remind us of Frye's analogical imagery which can further be divided into two main classes - analogy of experience and the analogy of innocence. The analogy of experience consists of those imageries where spirituality, nobility and morality fade far away from the society and tyranny prevails among human beings. Selfishness and immorality turns out to the kernel of the society. The analogy of innocence describes a condition where everything goes perfectly well and tyranny is vanished among common masses. The imageries of wild bear, the stork, the buffalo and the raven describes the experiences who want to create tyranny among the masses inferior to them whereas the imageries of donkey, rooster, monkey and parrots in a cage describe the analogy of innocence or innocent people or the subalterns who are victims of the experiences or the rich.

Rural Poverty and the Plights of Subalterns

The double divide between rich and poor is also evident in Indian villages. The master-slave relationship or power structure is still evident in Indian villages, which is degrading the life styles of the poor. Balaram, the central protagonist of the novel, lives in Laxmangarh, a village where people lives under degrading conditions. As the citizen of India, they are deprived of basic necessities like – electricity, health care services, housing and education.

> Electricity poles – defunct.
> Water tap – broken
> Children – too lean and short for their age, and with their oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India. (Adiga 2008, p. 20)

Sen (1979) opines that deprivation and inequality are major factors of poverty. When a person is being deprived economically and he faces inequality in the society, he might face poverty after certain time. Mabughi and Selim (2006) assert that poverty generates out of social deprivation. When a person is deprived of his basic rights for a long time, he faces poverty. The villagers of Laxmangarh encounter the same situation. They don't have proper housing, sanitation and basic amenities:

> At night they sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede.
> Men and boys sleep in another corner of the house.
> …
> I shake my brother Kishan's legs off my tummy, move my cousin Pappu's palm out of my hair, and extricate myself from the sleepers. (Adiga 2009, p. 21)

They live like a rooster coop in a congested area and fight with each other occasionally. "Every now and then they stop their work, because it is the time to fight. This fight means throwing metal vessels at one another, or pulling each other's hair" (Adiga 2009, p. 21). The central point of the village, the tea shop is another unhygienic place where the villagers sit together to gossip with each other. The place smells foul as dogs and pigs defecate there occasionally which mixes with dust and blows inside the shop. Patilet, et. al. (2002) rightly describe that they live in an unhygienic and most haphazard atmosphere where they are much prone to get infected by any diseases.

Child labour and unemployment is another major problem in rural India which has been depicted very carefully in this novel. Most of the villagers don't have proper work opportunities in the village; even the ones having a job are mostly employed in unorganized sector and are underpaid or receive severely low wages. Few of them work as rickshaw pullers though they too struggle hard for making their ends and meet. Other people, especially adults, often go to distant places in search of work.

When the buses came, they got on – packing the inside, hanging from the railings,

> climbing onto the roofs – and went to Gaya; there they went to the station and rushed into the trains – packing the inside, hanging from the railings, climbing onto the roofs – and went to Delhi, Calcutta, and Dhanbad to find work. (Adiga 2008, p. 26).

Like Adiga, Tickamyer and Duncan (1990) reveal that unemployment remains high in rural areas. The limited opportunities, lack of stable economic sources, and maldistribution of resources within the (native) communities have made economic conditions adverse for the poor people. Adiga also describes the same and states that these rural communities migrate to cities for better employment opportunities. While working in the city, most of them have to spend nights under the sky. Poverty persists in such an extreme stage that children work in tea stalls to earn their breads. Tickamyer and Duncan's (1990) rightly say that limited opportunities and unemployment have led them towards extreme poverty and underdevelopment.

The exploitation to the poor prevails to such an extreme stage that most of the workers are constantly exploited by their employers. The rickshaw pullers have to pay a certain amount of their earnings to the landlord, the Buffalo for using the road. The fishermen have to pay taxes to the Stork for catching fishes in the river and the boatmen have to pay money for crossing the river. The labours who work in the land of the Wild Boar have to endure the slavery of him (the Wild Boar) since they don't have alternative options to earn their bread. The oppression to the subaltern is so prominent that it makes them a human 'without identity' (Spivok, 2005) and they spend their lives with utter frustration and poverty. It reminds us of Tickamyer and Duncan's (1990) words who argue that the rural workers receive low wages which certainly trapped them into poverty. The villagers of Laxmangarh are living a life without identity and dignity. They are constantly being oppressed by the landlords or their employers. These dominant groups are deliberately attempting to impose their hegemony on the poor villagers.

Education and health are two important issues for the development of a nation and its people. The deprivation from these things leads a person towards poverty. Tickamyer and Duncan's (1990) claim that without access to education, the rural poor have no escape from poverty. Ratti (2018) argues that education is central to class revolution. When the poor are denied access to education, they are intentionally kept in the darkness of ignorance by the dominant class so that the latter can exercise power over them. The poverty of Laxmangarh has kept the poor children away from schools. The children like Munna and Kishan dropped out of the schools so that they could work in a tea-stall and can bear the burden of their families. Though there is a physical existence of a school in the village, teachers rarely teach there. Instead, they steal money from the school fund, chew red paan and sleep in the classroom:

> There is no duster in this class; there are no chairs; there are no uniforms for the boys. How much money have you stolen from the school funds, you sister-fucker? (Adiga 2008, p. 34).

The provision of health service is also bad in rural Indian villages. Patilet. et. al. (2002) remark that most of the people from rural area don't have money to spend on healthcare as most of them are labourers and farmers. Since they don't have proper drinking water facilities, nutritious food, they are always prone to epidemics. Most of the rural areas lack primary healthcare facilities which increase the mortality rate among the villagers. Though political leaders promise to provide good healthcare facilities before election, they rarely keep their promises after the election. As a result, the poor villagers continue to remain the primary sufferers as they were before. The villagers of Laxmangarh also suffer from the same problem. They don't even have a hospital in the village. When Balaram's father was suffering from serious health issue, Balaram and his brother had to cross the river to get the treatment of his father. On reaching the hospital, they found that there was no doctor. Even, the place was quite unhygienic with goats and cats sitting near the patients.

> There was no doctor in the hospital. The ward boy, after we bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening. The doors to the hospital's rooms were wide open; the beds had metal springs sticking out of them, and the cat began snarling at us

> the moment we stepped into the room. (Adiga, 2008, p. 48)

Although they bribed the ward boy, their father didn't get proper treatment which led his father to death. On visiting the hospital, Balaram and his brother explored how deeply corrupt the system was. The superintendent of the hospital along with the local leaders was taking bribes from others. Laxmangarh thus stands as a sample among the villages of India. Like Balaram's father, thousands of poor die every month without getting proper medical treatment. The government changes after every five years, but the politics of 'A New India' certainly remain a myth to the poor because their own conditions remain unchanged. They still die without getting the basic facilities and continue being suppressed and subjugated as they were before. The rich suck their blood like leeches and throw them away when their need is fulfilled.

Urban Poverty and the Plights of Subalterns

Adiga has portrayed another crude reality of the lives of poor people who lives in urban area. The double divide between the rich and the poor is clearly evident in urban spaces also. In winter, while the rich people of Delhi keep electric heaters or gas heaters, the homeless are forced to live under the sky:

> The rich of Delhi, to survive the winter, keep electrical heaters, or gas heaters, or even burn logs of wood in their fireplaces. When the homeless, or servants like night watchman and drivers who are forced to spend time outside in winter, want to keep warm, they burn whatever they find on the ground. (Adiga, 2008, p. 156)

The plight and miseries become quite evident when a person becomes a slum dweller. Most of the people here work in unorganized sectors. They live in tents which are built just beside the huge sewage from where the foul smell enters into their neighbourhood. The tents are mostly covered with tarpaulin sheets, broken glasses, tyres and sacks. The condition of these slum dwellers resemble a lot with the rooster coops in cages that shit on each other, fight with each other and jostle for the breathing place. Appadurai (2000) also says the same words:

> The insecurely housed poor are everywhere and are only partly concentrated in *bastis* (slums), jopad-pattis, and chawls. Almost every one of these kinds of housing for the poor, including roofs, parapets, compound walls, and overhangs, is subject to socially negotiated arrangements. (p. 637).

Agarwal (2011) has observed the same condition among the poor in the urban slum as they don't have proper food and sanitation systems. They live amidst such vulnerable and physically contaminated environment that they are mostly prone to various kinds of diseases. Bisai and Singh (2019) also remarked that when the poor are denied basic needs, they tend to involve themselves in crime as they need to earn their livelihood by hook or crook.

Another cause of poverty in urban slum is the excess of population. The poor in the urban slum never take care of birth control. Sometimes they have eight, nine, or ten children who loiter around the streets since they don't have enough space inside their homes to stay in. Some parents don't even know the names of their children. Merrick (2002) finds a positive correlation between poverty and high fertility rate and argues that high fertility rate in a family begets poverty. He also explains that poor people want more children as they think children bring wealth and prosperity in the family by generating labour in the market. They also conceive it as a social security available to them in their old age. This might be the primary reason that they don't want to control their birth ratio even though they cannot provide proper care and parenting to all their children. When these children don't get proper care from their parents, they suffer from emotional insecurity, engage themselves in socially and physically degrading works, even in crime. Bisai and Singh (2019) also remark that the lack of affection and love from their parents engages them in criminal work as they have nothing to lose in their lives if they are punished by the law.

The lives of the drivers and servants are quite measurable in the city. They don't even

have a proper place to sleep. They have to sleep in the dormitory or servants' room, where there are lots of mosquitoes, cockroaches, bugs, lizards etc.

> I swept the floor, tied the mosquito net to four nails on the wall, and went to sleep. In the middle of the night, I understand why the mosquito net had been left there. Noises woke me up. The wall was covered with cockroaches, which had come to feed on the minerals…Some of the cockroaches landed on the top of the net; from inside, I could see their dark bodies against its white weave. (Adiga, 2008, p. 131)

Appadurai (2000) describes that domestic servants are provided small rooms in the large houses or apartments of the rich which often makes them think themselves as privileged. Time and again they start bringing over their friends and relatives who start to live under the staircases, in the foyers, and inside the enclosed compounds.

On the other hand, the rich want the poor to remain within their grasps because they need servants who can provide domestic help as well as these servants can be used as puppets depending upon situations and requirements. The rich rarely exhibit proper humane behaviour with the poor; instead, the latter are treated like dogs. The family of Ashok made Balaram the scapegoat when Pinky Madam, Ashok's wife, ran over a child under her car. They were forcing him to take the blame of the accident and go behind bars. It is not only the case with Balaram, but with thousands of other poor people who are put behind bars for no fault of their own. The rich play politics by taking the advantage of their poverty and make the poor endure endless sufferings. Taylor (2013) also says that the poor are denied basic human right and they are treated ruthlessly by the rich.

A Corrupt Democracy and the Power Structure

Though democracy talks about equality, in India, it reminds us (Indians) of the words from George Orwell (1945) who says, "*All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others*". In democracy, common people have the right to vote and choose their government. But most of the times, they don't get the right to cast their vote as the voting booth itself is looted by goons hired by political leaders. Being a common man, Balaram and his father also faced the same situation "I am India's most faithful voter, and I still have not seen the inside of a voting booth". (p, 102) Even in the general Lok Sabha elections 2019 (India), the same has been spotted by media and has been accepted by The Election Commission of India, and hence ordered to conduct re-polling in certain districts of Tripura. The common people were rigged and threatened inside the pooling booth, which depicts the fact that they often don't get the right to express their opinions and are constantly exploited by the rich people. They are compelled to sell their votes forcefully before the night of election by taking some bribes from the leaders (as refusing it is related to their life risk):

> Now the rallies were done. The priest celebrated a special pooja to pray for the Great Socialist's victory; Mutton birayani was distributed on paper plates in front of the temple; and in the evening, there was free booze for all. (p. 100).

The poor are constantly fooled by the rich politicians since most of the illiterate mass believes in fake promises. Even if some of them don't happen to believe in these political leaders, they either don't know a way out, or possess very limited power to resist this political oppression. Hence, they accept the violence silently by sacrificing their basic human rights.

In fact, poverty is politicized by political parties in democratic countries like India, so that they can operate their hegemonic power status on the poor. When Balaram enrolled himself in the elite society, he too tried to escape crime by bribing the police and the poor people were denied justice. When Balaram was poor, he was also made a scapegoat by his employer and was forced to take responsibility of the crime committed by the elite. Hence, the elite society controls the power structure so that they can take advantage of the poor according to the demand of situations. Police and judges become puppets in the hands of the elites - "If people start beating the judges – in their own courtrooms - then what is the future for our country?"

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(Adiga 2009, p. 214) and these poor people become the silent victims of this corrupt system.

Abuse or Physical Violence as an Operator of Oppression:

Prilletensky and Gonick (1996) describe language as the vehicle of emotional abuse, interpersonal oppression. When an individual becomes a subject of oppression by the rich, he is abused by them as it is one of the most important apparatuses of oppression, and that individual is portrayed as an inferior, useless, unloved, stupid being. The oppression to Balaram is two-fold. Firstly, he is abused by his class – his family members, servants, drivers etc. Secondly, he is abused and assaulted by his employers. Kusum, Balaram's grandmother always uses degrading languages or derogatory words to offend him. "He is a coward, and he eats too much" (p. 28). Ram Bahadur, the Nepali watchman in the house of Ashok treats him badly by using derogatory words like – "fuck off", "inferior than dog" etc. The drivers also start insulting him by using cheap words like – country mouse, village idiot, monkey etc. Pinky madam and Ashok make fun of him for his pronunciation "It's not piJJa, It's piZZa (p. 154). It's not maal, it's a mall (p. 146). Prilletensky and Gonick (1996) rightly remark they are always represented in negative lights and they have started internalizing these negative images silently projected onto them by the dominating class. Balaram's employers also use various offensive terms such as moron, idiot, sister-fucker etc. to address him. Though he feels bad with these words, he cannot protest against it since he is inferior to them both economically and socially. These psychological abuses get intensified later with the addition of physical force. Prilletensky and Gonick (1996) argue that these verbal abuses are also accompanied by emotional abuses which primarily reject love, care, nurturing, friendships, support etc. Balaram was assaulted physically by Ashok when Pinky Madam left Ashok and went to America:

> When I knocked on the door, he caught me by the collar of my shirt and pulled me inside… He grabbed me and pushed me against the balcony of the apartment. The landlord inside him wasn't dead, after all.
>
> 'Why did you drive her there, sister-fucker?' (p. 182)

Even Ashok's father assaults and abuses Balaram very often as he thinks that they deserve it from their master. Walsh et al. (2011) argues that oppression often promotes abuse on weaker sections as they are dependent on the powerful elites. They also use it as an apparatus to exercise their power and control over the poor.

Conclusion

In the Indian society, subaltern rights have been violated over years and *The White Tiger* is simply a replica of it. The politics of the rich over the subalterns are so deeply rooted in our society that the latter have internalized a negative image about their own selves which most of them can hardly overcome. The subalterns have internalized this hegemonic concept so deeply that they can hardly protest against this dominant class though Balaram is an exception to it. Though most of these oppressed people know that the false promises of the political leaders will never fulfil their dream of 'A New India', yet they continue casting votes for these corrupt political leaders as they don't have any representative who can put forth their opinions in the parliament. Also, since they were deprived of education for a long time, they have lost the capacity to judge right and wrong for themselves. As a result, the elite society takes the advantage of their ignorance and upheld the power for years. Very few people among the subalterns can become like Balaram who declare revolt against the master class and can pierce through their neck to declare an end of an oppression which he and his people have been subjected to for a long time. He is perhaps the only brave among those subalterns who can raise his voice against oppression and can establish himself in a respectable position. But, (only) few can declare such revolt against their master. As a result, the politics of 'A New India' sustains,

'Ache Din' (good days) never arrives for the poor and the concept of 'A New India' still remains a myth for the common people.

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