

Representing the Postcolonial Subaltern: A study of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger.*

Ram Bhawan Yadav

The politic of literary representation is supposed to be deliberate and complex in its nature and approach. The motivation, intent and agenda that direct such endeavor often result in domain of conflict, which leads to the crisis of literary, social and political representation. As Simon Featherstone points out, "In postcolonialism it [the crisis] is a truism that touches upon the crucial issues of representation and upon the economic and ideological control of production and reproduction of narratives of 'other' cultures (48). In this paper, I am concerned with two dimensions of subaltern representation in literature which I have divided in two sections. In the first section I have attempted to present the dominant discourses of Subaltern issues and its representation in literature. In the second section my concern is to study Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in the spectrum of these discourses i.e. how domination and power exert in subaltern discourses. Within postcolonial discourses, I argue that these two issues are interconnected in the representation of marginal and explore the voices of unheard in reconfiguring of subaltern theorization. The subaltern theorization is directed to touch upon the core issues of cultural and economic power and the representation of marginal that are at centre in the politic of discipline itself. The notion of representation of postcolonial subaltern is based on argument that discursive focus can be shifted from hegemonic to marginalized. The main motivation of this transaction is to centralise subaltern's marginal position in society in terms of social and political, both of which is outcome of systematic and structural marginalization. The concerns about the representation of the marginalised group in national historiography prompted a group of Indian historians to form the subaltern studies group.

The subaltern studies project initiated by progressive historians aims to revise and rewrite Indian historiography from Subaltern perspective. This is highly revisionist project which is stated by Spivak as "The most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the 'subaltern'" (330). The main agenda of this project was focused on a large number of issues including peasant and insurgencies in colonial and postcolonial India, was motivated to compile them as strong and viable historical evidence that needed to be taken in gamut of Indian history. In the realm of literature, Spivak heralded the subaltern discourse with the publication of her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and in her reply she said "no" (Spivak, 309). She further clarifies that when a subaltern does speak she/he is no longer a subaltern. I perceive that Spivak's argument is slightly related to speech than power and ability of subaltern to make them heard. It is her conception that subaltern studies group, even as a non-subaltern mediator is conduit to record subaltern narrative. She labelled it as distinctive self consciousness of locating the "subaltern" as the "subject" of history and not its object. Ranjit Guha has stated as in the first subaltern series "Yet we propose to focus on this consciousness [subaltern] as our central theme, because it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject" (11). So what is the meaning of this subaltern consciousness and how it is different from other? Partha Chatterjee opined on this as:

"Subaltern consciousness as self-consciousness of a sort is what inhabits the whole area of independent thought and conjecture and speculation...on the part of the peasant...what offers the clear proof of a distinctly independent interpretation of [Gandhi's] message".(172)

In the other dimension it can be stated that it is self consciousness that underwrites all innovation of will of subaltern.. John Beverley in “The Subaltern and the Limits of Academic Knowledge” states that the very idea of “‘studying’ the subaltern is catachrestic or self-contradictory” (21). Postcolonialism as a literary, historical and political theory has multiple recourses to study various representation of subalternity. Who can speak for whom, how discourses can best represent and interpret the experiences of subalternity, and who bears the cost? My approach in the selected text is to focus on the self consciousness discourse of subaltern representation. My aim in reading Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is to take into consideration the different social constructions of subalternity. Of being various social constructions, the common narrative should subvert the homogenous and “corrective” consciousness of subaltern. The novel *The white tiger* which deals with subaltern characters. I have attempted in the text to prove that “subaltern can speak” and to retrieve that subaltern narrate his/her own subalternity that presents the indictment of dominant cultural positions.

In the introduction of *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, Vinyak Chaturvedi pointed out the argument which Said in forward to the *selected subaltern studies* did as one when subaltern studies was articulated as postcolonial project. It has some strange difference with other postcolonial theoretical concepts. For instance, one of the criticisms of postcolonial studies as a discipline has been the blurring of oppositions. Maxim Silverman locates one of the major problems in postcolonial/poststructuralist strategies of reading and resistance the tendency to “occasionally lose (s) sight of power relations altogether in an effort to break the monolithic dualism of the master/slave model ()”. From Spivak’s seminal essay that she answers with a qualified “no,” to various literary representations of the subaltern in texts that are part of an emergent canon, the subaltern and his/her other is represented as a binary (even a complex binary) of the oppressed/oppressor. To the extent that subaltern is made central character, literary discourse complements the agenda of Subaltern Studies group. However, in addressing the subject, literary discourse takes on the role of the “intellectual” who speaks for the subaltern, “granting” literary space but not voice. This is in keeping with Spivak’s conclusion that subaltern who does speak is not a subaltern. Consequently, representations of the subaltern function within that dichotomy of can/cannot speak. Within such a framework, there is no room for subaltern consciousness to be read as a complex negotiator of its own positional dilemmas and political impotence, which is transformed even as it is transformative of its environment. As Homi Bhabha suggests in “The Commitment to Theory”, variant representations can only be understood if “we understand the tension within critical theory between its institutional commitment and revisionary forces” (27). For Bhabha, the task of postcolonial representation is simultaneously a rejection of the West as the centre and a renegotiation of an accommodating, continuing conversation with the imperial centres. As he explains:

My use of poststructuralist theory emerges from this postcolonial contra modernity. I attempt to present a certain ‘defeat’ or even impossibility, of the ‘West’ in its authorization of the ‘idea’ of colonization. Driven by the subaltern history of the margins of modernity—rather than by failures of logo centrism—I have tried, in some small measure, to revise the known, to rename the postmodern from the position of the postcolonial. (175)

II

The White Tiger (2008) as its title symbolically suggests the subversion of oppressed-dominated, in wider context colonized (domestic/stately), into oppressor/dominator. It records the story of oppressed-dominated man (Balram Halwai) and his big fabricated events that make up the fabric structure of novel in the small village of

Laxamarganj situated in the darkness of India, Jharkhand and consequently moving to Delhi and Bangalore. The existence of the small people in the novel is portrayed in the subordinate condition of big people who are oppressor or dominator who shape and control their lives. Adiga has commissioned a novel in which representation of subaltern and their resistance for their identity and status is presented as their struggle aspiring to be from periphery to centre. The novel has been written in the epistolary form and for this Adiga explains the reason like this:

It is a story he can never tell anyone because it involves murder in the real life; now he tells it when no one is around. Like all Indians, who are obsessed (A colonial legacy, probably) with the outsider's gaze he is stimulated to think about his country and society by the imminent arrival of a foreigner, and an important one. So he talks about himself and his country in the solitude of his room. (*The Sunday Times*, April 6, 2008).

However, within the spectrum of postcolonial subaltern representation, *The White Tiger* is one of the Magnus opus literary efforts to bring into notice the issues of subaltern and their miserable condition before the world audience. Adiga's novel exposes the difficulties that accrue the task of recuperating the consciousness and the voice of the oppressed and their subjugated histories in India. Taking this text in ambit of discussion of subaltern discourse, I think that subaltern resistance and voices in the novel is different from the canonised definition of these in postcolonial literature that is more complex for the understanding of subaltern engagement.

So, what is the type of undertaken action of subaltern character in the novel? How are the social hierarchies characterized and how does the narrative interpolate them? If the subaltern's acts can be termed as "rebellious," how do they serve those who perform them? The binary structure of reality and representation has remained a source of contentious debate. For the presence of these two parts, while logically allowing a differentiation between them, also inevitably leads to hierarchization and evaluation, so that representation is often conceived of as opposition between originality and derivativeness, authenticity and fakeness, which are attributed to the parts of the binary (Chow, 39). My central concern in novel is Balram Halwai, rickshaw puller, driver, murderer and finally business man and other characters like his father, vijay, his brother, aunt etc to study them from the subaltern marginalised and oppressed point of view. It is through the struggle of Balram that other characters are also discussed in the novel. They also for varying reason represent subaltern positions within the dominant structure of Indian society. They along with Balram struggle with the forces of class, caste and gender. Marx a social and political philosopher categorised existing society in two functioning group: Bourgeois and Proletariats- exploitative and exploited. Adiga has converted these two notions as men big bellies and the men with small bellies- the rich and the poor. Politically it may be ruler and ruled. The theory of resistance or subversion is the major themes in *The White Tiger*. The master- servant relationship that exists between Balram and Ashok. His transformation begins with his resistance to the exploitation by his grandmother Kusum and his landlord and masters the stork, the mongoose (Mukesh) and the lamb Ashok. Laxamangarh is always addressed as the darkness and there only poor people lived and who worshipped Hanuman because, "He is shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love and devotion" (19). The plot of the novel lingers around Balram Halwai, in Adiga's imaginative village Laxamangarh, where the villagers, family and friends are subjected to exploitation, torture and torment by the village landlord. Balram by nature is ambitious and try to improve his social position. It brought him to Delhi as the driver of one of landlord's westernised son Ashok. Delhi is the place where Balram feels the great gap between rich and poor and between two castes: the men with the big bellies and men with the small bellies, those who eat and those who are eaten. All these

social, political and economical disparities gradually inculcate in Balram's mind the spirit of revolt, resistance and vengeance, which remained suppressed for sometime in Balram's unconscious mind. His father's plan or cherished dream for his son might has inspired him constantly to resist and improve his subaltern or subordinate condition. "And when you see these strict men, think of my father. Rickshaw –puller he may have been a human beast of burden- but my father was a man with a plan. I was his plan"(27). "When he caught his breath, he said, 'my whole life, I have been treated like donkey. All I want is that one son of mine- at least one-should live like a man" (30). The novel exposes the subalternity which is deeply rooted malaise of casteism and class consciousness in Indian society. In novel Balram's position is subaltern who as a subaltern belongs to the subaltern section of society and low caste and become mouthpiece of numerous marginalised, poverty stricken Indians. Adiga through the presentation of Balram Halwai presents that how the low caste people are treated by the high caste people. Balram's struggle to shed off oppressive forces is evidence to the fact that low caste people remain concern and deprived of all that goes with the plenty and the high caste. A place that is reserved only for high class people with having the authority of domination, exploitation and oppression. They use their high class or caste to subjugate or dominate the lower one. Balram, who first dreams and dare to enter in the restricted domain created by oppressor and revolts and gets success and recognition at any cost, thus he gives the voice to his oppressed, abused and exploited brethren.

In the postcolonial subaltern discourse or representation the notion of class is interpreted as binary division. The novel explicates in its theme the dominating issues of class conflict which shows the big gap in the life of the rich and poor people (half baked people). The attempts and resistive medium undertaken by Balram from Munna to becoming Ashok Sharma is tug of war between rich and poor. The dominator- rich or high caste people attempt to keep status quo in their favour while the deprived and disadvantaged ones strive for their rightful place in the world. The story commences from Bihar (Darkness) and ends up at Bangalore, symbolically from darkness to light, exposing two Indias, separated not only by geographically but also culturally, socially and professionally.

Balram is from backward village Laxmangarh situated near Bodh Gaya in Bihar and belongs to a poor family with low caste *shudra* which is a badge of shame and humiliation as he admits "like all good stories; mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness" (14). His father who has been living like a 'donkey' wants at least one of his sons should live like a man. Balram who is named as 'white tiger' 'the creature that comes along only once in a generation, by a visiting inspector of schools, could not continue his schooling due to poverty. Balram is allured to be a driver in the imitation of Vijay by seeing his satisfactory life. As a driver number two in Dhanbad at stock's house hold who is man of big bellies, suffers humiliation, exploitation and torture finally reaches Delhi as driver of Ashok and Pinky Madam. Gradually he became more and more ambitious and result of it that he murdered his master and with the booty reaches Bangalore and starts his journey as an entrepreneur thus he overcomes to challenge or subvert the social hierarchy and subaltern ideology imposed on him. In the social fabric of Indian society one's fortune is determined by his religion caste and sex. Everything in the life is predetermined – who will do what and how he will have to conduct in the society. In the village of Laxamgarh the reign, oppression and domination of four big guns – Buffalo, stork, wild Boar and Raven are perceptible and the rest of the villagers depend on their exploitative mercy. Balram is made to realise that driving is not the job for low people; it belongs to particular castes, and not of lowly *shudras*. The old driver tells Balram, "how can you learn to drive . . . it is like a taming a wild stallion- only a boy from the warrior castes can manage that. You need to have aggression in your blood. Muslims, Rajputs, and Sikhs – they are fighters, they can become drivers" land lord is also very much concern with Balram's caste

and family background, “are you from a top caste or bottom caste, boy... all our employers are top caste” (64-65). The dominant class’s oppressive view comes to the light even in the hiring servant for their daily uses. It is also evident that subjugated or subaltern are also conscious about the status provided by their master. The consciousness of the servant reflects even for the possession of the small object too- as who will drive Honda city and who Maruti 800. The disparities between the religions are also presented in the novel. A man is himself forced to change his religious identity only for getting a job as a driver. And when it is revealed he is forced to quit his job. Religious impediment is evident in the fact when stork ordered his grandson to call himself Gavaskar rather than Azharuddin while playing cricket with Balram. The landlord- the buffalo, the stork, the wild boar, the raven have been represented as retaliation what they once attributed to the subaltern, as shorts of animals without the propensities in them. Their name has symbolic connotations. These animals treat the low caste people like Balram as animal as or worse than them. Balram is chided and abandon by the Nepali servant when he handles brutally two pomerians in chains: “Don’t pull the chain so hard! They are worth more than you are!”(78). this comment shaken Balram’s inner consciousness and accelerates his rapacity to get success in his life at any cost. In the term of colonialism and exploitation the relationship between colonizer and the colonized is like master and slave. In India, this relationship is noticeable in novel *The White Tiger*. Indian has no respect for their service providers – cooks, drivers, sweepers- whatever the nature of their job may be; they just fit into one class – servants or slaves. The slavery is prevalent only in the third world countries not in the West. Ahsok while boasting about India tells his wife, “we have got people to take care of us here- our drivers, our watch men our masseurs, and where in New York will you find someone to bring you tea and sweets biscuits while you are still lying in the bed, the way Ram Bahadur does for us?”(89). Adiga has represented in the novel two kind of India one presenting the darker aspect in other words – the world of subaltern or subjugated and the other of light means the world of colonizers/dominator/ oppressor and exploiter. The first represents the backward poverty ridden cow belt North India where the feudal Lord are the master of the life of the suppressed masses, and the progressive shining, educated south India where even the sun shines on the ‘half baked’. In India poor have no right to be part of democratic process. On the day of voting, they are brought like herds and do whatever they are asked to do. They are subject to be ruled by the bourgeois class and have to follow the rules set by the master. This is the case with the people of Laxamagarh, during elections, the hopeless and helpless people as described by Balram, “like eunuchs discussing the *Kama Shutra*, the voters’ discus elections in Laxmangarh” (98). The people of the village feel rejoice when the oppressor are humiliated by those having the ‘bigger bellies’ like the great socialist and keep on voting for their enemy’s enemy, as Balram gives a piece of his mind when great socialist humiliates Balram’s master, “That was the positive side of the great socialist. He humiliated all our masters- that is why we kept voting him back in”(105). The real education of Balram to penetrate the restricted domain for subaltern began when he initiates to acquaint himself with metropolitan city and its life style. The initial attempts executed by him is even not enough to situate his status as respectful being for he is hired servant to his master. And in his attempt to educate himself to subvert the bourgeois ideology he is subjected for humiliation and exploitation by Pinky Madam and Mukesh, “You are so filthy! Look at you, look at your teeth, and look at your clothes! There is a red *Paan* all over your teeth, and there are red spots on your shirt. It is disgusting! Get out- clean up the mess you have made in the kitchen and get out” (146). The domination of upper class people is revealed when a child is killed by the Pinky Madam while driving the Honda city and the responsibility is being entrusted on Balram’s head by stork family. Balram is hunted by the scene of hens and rooster situated behind Jama Mahjid and concludes that they have no option to escape so is the case with the lower class people.

Despite being conscious of their exploitation and vulnerability, they cannot come out of the hibernation. The ‘rooster coop’ symbolises Balram’s conscious expression to describe the oppressed, confined and helpless condition of the average Indian people. Sudir Apte writes, “This ‘Rooster Coop’ analogy is just one of the many devices that make *The White Tiger* a fun read, despite being such a depressing subject: the terrible caste subjugation, regular rigging of elections, and poor people’s votes being cast for them by their masters, are heavy topics, but when we read that the ‘villagers excitedly talk about local elections like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, we get it right away”. The representation of Balram’s status in the beginning of the novel is like subaltern destitute, but when he accumulates wealth, he becomes then like landlord, a position which was ideologically and socially restricted for him. He achieved this higher status through manipulation, murder and acquisition of wealth.

The novel demarcates a long conflicting gap between the educated, wealthy bourgeois and the rural rustic, illiterate proletarians. The subjugated or subaltern people are subject to suffer culturally, socially politically and professionally by the hand of bourgeois class. They are helpless to raise their voice and powerless to resist the exploitation and humiliation entrusted on them. Through they remain inarticulate but they have strong desire to come out of this mess in which their destiny has confined them. They have the instinct of rebellion, but keep them checked, by remaining in the service of their masters; they become well acquainted with the life style of their masters, their strengths and their vulnerability and then wait for the opportunity to strike back at the ‘beast’ in order to get the ultimate goal of being counted. They also have the seed of evils in them and this evil finally force them to challenge the existing order- the man made order of discrimination on the basis of caste and class- the downtrodden people revolt against their oppressors. This is done by Balram in the novel.

The implication of the theory of resistance in the novel is not instance but it has been implicated gradually with the development of Balram’s character. In the beginning he seems to be meek, soft fellow and religious too but the growing circumstances forces him to change his attitude for his master by serving his hypocritical and rotten masters. At the same time his attitude for his family members also undergoes a drastic change and he stops sending them money. He turned his concern about them except Kishan who has become ‘thinner and darker’ and imagines that instead of chicken the woman ‘has served me flesh from kishan’s own body on the plate’. He abandons the marriage proposal put forward by his Granny. He wants to sleep with blonde and drink English wine which rich people do. As stated in the review, “The New Morality that his [Balram’s] compatriots have embraced is soon grasped with both hands by the man from the darkness who thought that he had seen the light. Like the stork, like Mr.Ashok like the corrupt ministers, industrialists, judges’ generals and bureaucrats, like the pickpockets, pimps and prostitutes. Balram too becomes an entrepreneur of the new India. Through his methods to resist and get success is unethical but according to the author ‘he has violated the trust reposed in him by his master, but that is the way to get out of the jungle’. He showed his countless brethren, the depressed, and oppressed and subjugated one the way to the top. He gave voice to the hushed silence of those silenced people and also hope that even ‘half baked’ can have light in their life. Thus the story of Balram expressed the optimism that the lot of low class will change and they will become the makers of their own destiny.

The conclusion of the novel is that in contemporary India, there is a wind of change; people now generally don’t choose their profession as per their caste. There is no caste disparities to some extent but its presence cannot be denied to the some rural and backward areas. The castesim and class consciousness has sunk into two categories the men with big bellies’ and the ‘men with small bellies’.

Works cited:

- Adiga, Arvind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi: Haper Collins Publishers India, 2008.Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. "Representation and the Colonial Text: A critical Exploration of Some form of Mimeticism". *The Theory of Reading*. Ed Flank Groversmith. New Jersey: Branes and Nobles Books, 1984. Print.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.Print.
- Chatterjee, Partha. *Nationalist Thought and the Cultural World*. United Nations University. London, 1986.1993.Print.
- Featherstone, Simon. *Postcolonial Cultures*. University Press of Mississippi, 2005.Print
- Guha, Ranjit. Dominance without Hegemony: History and power in Colonial India, Cambridge, MA: Harward UP, 1997. Print.
- Griffiths, Gareth. "The Postcolonial Project: Critical Approach and Problems."New National and Postcolonial Literatures: An Introduction. Ed. Bruce King.Oxford: Clarendon, 1996. Print.
- Guha, Ranajit. *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*. Ed. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1992.Print.
- Hegal, G.W.F. *The Phenomology of Mind*. New York: Macmillan, 1931. Print.
- Simmons, Jon. <http://website.Lineone.net/-jon.simmons> /Roy.
- Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism/Orientalism*. New York: Alfred A.Knopf, 1994. Print.
- .Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Afterword." *Imaginary Maps*. By Mahashweta Devi. New York: Routledge, 1994. 197-205. Print.
- "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* Ed Larry Grossberg and Cary Nelson. Urbana. University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271-313.Print.