

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

5th Year of Open Access

Vol. 5, Issue-6 December 2014

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Quest for New Identity in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the need of struggle for new identity. The end of brutality and the advent of subaltern consciousness is the major issue of the novel. The reflection of the successive attempts of the subaltern reveals the rise of enlightenment and the end of darkness through entrepreneurship. It seems, as the novel describes that Twenty First century is the end of repression and brutality if subaltern rise from every nook and corner following the path of Balram Halwai. Furthermore, the birth of new name with new identity is the outcome of awareness and consciousness that is possible only through working space and opportunity. In addition, the novel is the true testament that raises the voice of the voiceless, the subaltern and it justifies that the subaltern can speak. The novel, in that sense can be studied as the response of Spivak's "Can subaltern speak?"

Keywords: New Identity, brutality, advent, subaltern consciousness, repression, transform, entrepreneurship, rebellious consciousness, enlightenment

Introduction

In *The White Tiger*, Arvind Adiga, presents a protagonist Balram Halwai who struggles to come to terms with his new identity. While working as a cook, dishcleaner and a driver, Halwai transforms himself into a master. He differentiates himself from his master through actions with consequences. Revolting against the brutality of Ashok and Pinky Madam, he is able to affirm the identity of a successful entrepreneur from a Rikshaw Puller's nameless son 'Munna'. In three years of schooling, a school teacher Krishna gives him a name Balram Halwai. Despite his interest to continue study, his parents at Laxmangarh cannot afford to continue his study and his bold decision of leaving home in search of job drives him towards further struggle. Driving for Ashok, the son of landlord, for him, has been the biggest space and opportunity for learning. He develops rebellious consciousness by travelling, visiting shopping malls, listening All India Radio and working in different fields. Balram's rebellious consciousness is subaltern consciousness which is so much heightened and he has been able to save himself from the conspiracy of Pinky madam and Ashok. Pinky Madam's real behaviour is revealed as she kills an innocent child and plans to blame Balram. After the incident Balram's position rises where as Ashok and Pinky Madam make a divorce and start to live separately. After murdering Ashok, Balram runs away from Delhi to Bangalore and establishes a car company. He concludes that he is the white tiger because the white tiger is a rare animal and in the same way, Balram wants to prove that he is also as rare as the white tiger. Balram's interest of comparing himself with white tiger indicates that he is as bold as the tiger on the one hand and on the other hand he is not only tiger but 'white tiger' and the colour symbol of 'white' may be the symbol of emerging subaltern and their consciousness through rebellion. He struggles hard to form new identity as Ashok Sharma, a successful business entrepreneur.

Analysis

The critic Sanjaya Subrahmanyam speaks that *The White Tiger* shares anger at the injustices of new, globalized India as he writes, "The novel has its share of anger at the injustices of the new, globalized India, and it's good to hear this among the growing chorus of celebratory voices"(33). Here, Sanjaya argues Balram's voice is the expression of anger against injustice. His act of murder of Ashok is justifiable. Balram argues, "I am not just any murderer but one who killed his own employer...and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer"(45). Isn't it the resistance against injustice? People should celebrate the voice of Balram and they should hear his voices as his voice is the voice of rebellious consciousness. His voice is the voice for bringing revolution against injustice.

Pramod K. Nayar writes:

Diasporic writing, especially in the age of globalization, is a consciousness raising genre, where political issues of cultural citizenship, cosmopolitan justice and global inequality run alongside themes of nostalgia, imaginative reconstructions of the homeland, and identities. (191)

On the surface, the novel is not diasporic but it seems diasporic in nature while working at Ashok and Pinky Madam, Balram feels as if he is in exile in his own homeland but later on Balram creates new identity from the same homeland through struggle and resistance. Pramod's argument is that diasporic writing is a consciousness raising genre, cultural citizenship, cosmopolitan justice, global inequality and reconstruction of homeland and identities in postcolonial world. In this sense, *The White Tiger* is consciousness raising genre in which the main character Balram Halwai develops rebellious consciousness through action. The novel can be taken as a cultural citizenship as it talks about the protection of Hinduism from the attack of Christianity. The novel is also the document of cosmopolitan justice and inequality created by globalization because innocent Balram does not compromise in signing the letter which was prepared to blame him as criminal driver who killed a child. Instead, he murders his master. When Balram owns The White Tiger Car Company, he starts to reconstruct the homeland (India) and their identities. In the past, Balram was just 'Munna' a nameless and identity less man but today he is neither Balram nor 'Munna' but his identity is completely different that is 'Ashok Sharma' and 'Ashok Sharma' represents the rising social political and economic status of the subaltern in post-independence India.

According to Thomas Lee, Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* explores some flaws even in democracy. He argues, "The White Tiger echoes masterpiece of resistance and oppression...the unfulfilled promises of democracy"(41). There is a clash between resistance and oppression. Balram represents the agent of 'resistance' where as Ashok and Pinky Madam represent the agents of 'oppression'. The novel exposes the unfulfilled promises of democracy in Indian nationalism. It is said all people can exercise their rights freely in democracy but the question is 'Balram' himself is not secured in his own nation. He is working, living and surviving in fear. He says oral promises do not work in democracy but we need to go through action to make democracy successful. Balram quite interestingly argues, "I am not a sentimental man... I am a man of action"(12). It shows Balram believes in action rather than in speech. He is quite determined that his future success depends on action and for that he should not be sentimental but he should start to do job. He has been so strong that even the death of his mother cannot make him sentimental. He is quite happy as he saw India being free from the British rule in 1947. End of colonial rule has been the occasion of celebration

for the subaltern like Balram. Balram's real struggle starts as he begins the job of driving, "The missing man was employed as driver of Honda city vehicle..." (32). Here, he enjoys the profession of driving at Pinky Madam and Ashok in their Honda City Car. There is no any sign of hesitation in Balram and enjoys, "working in a teashop. Smashing coals, wiping tables"(38). For him action is progress. So he is ready to do any types of jobs. He proves himself greater than the people having colonial mentality and he feels superior in terms of logic as he argues, "Defence colony or Greater Kailash or Vasant Kunj and inside their colonies the houses have numbers and letters, but this numbering and lettering system follows no known system of logic"(119). Here, Balram finds colonizers weak in logic rather than the Indians.

Highlighting the two major problems of caste and class of India, David Mattin argues:

It is a thrilling ride through a rising global power; a place where, we learn the brutality of the modern city is compounded by that of age-old tradition. 'In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India', says Balram. 'These days there are two castes: men with big bellies, and men with small bellies.'(24)

It shows the major problem of India, in the past, was the problem caste system but now class problem is the major problem. There is frequent clash between rich and poor. Balram represents a man with 'small bellies' where as Ashok and Pinky Madam represent 'man' with big bellies in globalized India. Balram sees problems in his own city, New Delhi, the capital city of India as he says, "The main thing to know about Delhi is that the roads are good, and the people are bad. The police are totally rotten"(124). The writer's major concern is that 'self-correction' is a must to bring change. The writer is quite critical towards the activities of police and the people in Delhi who forget human values and morality. He knows self correction is essential to bring drastic change. For Balram politicians and parliamentarians are most corrupted people as he exposes, "I'm not a politician or a parliamentarian. Not one of those extraordinary men who can kill and move on as if nothing had happened"(295). For Balram, politicians and parliamentarians are the major obstacles in the path of development and progress. He does not believe in them as they may kill innocent people quite surprisingly just like Pinky Madam who hit an innocent child while driving.

Jamaica Kincaid is quite aggressive with the colonizers and their regressive ruling policy and says, "Have you ever wondered to yourself why it is that all people like me seem to have learned from you is how to imprison and murder each other, how to govern badly, and how to take the wealth of our country and place it in Swiss Bank account"(34). It shows the people of colonized nations learnt nothing from colonizers but they gave the lessons of murdering and imprisoning each other. They taught the lesson of corruption. In *The White Tiger*, Balram is quite critical to Pinky madam and Ashok though he works at them. He is quite critical in all of their activities. He does not take driving for the sake of driving but driving becomes the source of learning. The surprising thing is that Ashok and Pinky Madam wanted to declare Balram, a murderer but they failed in their mission. The colonizers never imagined good governance. Their ruling was full of corruption. But Balram's struggle is the struggle for equal justice, good governance and freedom. Pinky Madam is colonial agent who murders a child; the child represents the death of colonized Indians who had been victimized from the colonizers. Balram's struggle is the struggle against colonial policy. Pinky madam is quite proud and fashionable. In the name of being modern she drives in drunk and hits a child and the child dies. Ashok and Pinky Madam plan to blame Balram. A letter is prepared and is told to sign in it. He is forced to sign the paper:

To whomsoever It May Concern.

I Balaram Halwai... I drove the car that hit an unidentified person... I swear by Almighty god that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.

Singnature or thumbprint:

(Balram Halwai). (167)

It shows the colonizers committed a lot of crimes and tried to escape away from the responsibility. They were very clever in conspiracy. Pinky Madam and Ashok plan to blame Balram and they decide to make him responsible for the accident. Balram cannot tolerate it and decides to finish Ashok off as he justifies, "I slit Mr. Ashok's throat"(42). This is the great action in his life. He did a great job otherwise he was sure to be blamed by Ashok and Pinky Madam. The death of Ashok is the death of colonial agent and the moment of his death becomes the moment of victory in his life. There is no one to express sympathy upon the death of Ashok as even Pinky Madam had already divorced with him. This family fragmentation indicates the end of colonial power and rise of postcolonial nation like India.

The post colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha argues, "memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity... remembering is never a quiet act of introspection and retrospection. It is a painful remembering..."(63). It shows Bhabha's hybrid personality. For him postcolonial identity is a painful remembering. The past of the colonized people was painful. Past cannot be totally forgotten and totally new identity cannot be created due to painful memory of the past. In this sense the protagonist Balram's present status is just hybrid and his identity is nothing new but just the mimicry of the west. Balram's identity is new in the sense that he is not a servant now. He murdered Ashok. How did Balram learn to murder? He learnt it from the acts of Pinky Madam who killed a child hitting by her car. Isn't it mimicry? At last Balram's name is changed into Ashok Sharma. Isn't it mimicry as well? Balram is the man of right action. He has been a successful entrepreneur now but his memory of the past is painful. Here, he remembers Lord Buddha and he is proud of being his disciple. Balram glorifies the richness of Indian culture. He argues, "We live in a glorious land. The Lord Buddha received his enlightenment in this land. The river Ganga gives life to our plants and our animals and our people. We are grateful to God that we were born in this land" (34). Balram believes that change is possible only being enlightened like Buddha and even Ganga river is the source of inspiration for Indian to be enlightened. So the Indian should not forget the path of justice. Balram became quite radical and killed Ashok due to unbearable justice upon him. He was given new name Balram by a school teacher as he argues, "I came home that day and told my father that the school teacher had given me a new name..."(14). The issue is quite interesting here because the writer shows some sort of consciousness that was emerging at least in school teacher. At least, the school teachers are aware about their identity. So 'Balram' was the name which was given by his own teacher and this name was chosen according to Indian culture. Balram was the sidekick of the God Krishna. Balram's source of enlightenment was his school though he studied there just for three years.

Gayatri Spivak in her essay "Can Subaltern speak?" (1985), does not seem quite hopeful about the future of the subaltern. She argues, "Can we touch the consciousness of the people, even as we investigate their politics? With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?"(285). It shows subaltern cannot speak because they do not have consciousness. She might be indicating that the subaltern can speak but their subjectivity

needs to come out by themselves but not by others. To speak, they need freedom, courage and consciousness. In front of the colonizers, "The subaltern cannot speak." (308). The subaltern can speak if they act just like Balram Halwai in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*. In this sense, Balram can speak because he has the sense of freedom, courage and consciousness. So Spivak's point is that subaltern can speak if they emerge with consciousness. But the problem is that west (Europe) becomes the source of subaltern consciousness. Balram developed consciousness through different modes of production of the west. Balram listens All India Radio, goes to shopping mall with Ashok and Pinky Madam and he is quite fascinated with the modes of productions of the west. Balram is appointed as a car driver in Ashok's house. He learns so many things from their life styles and becomes conscious. At last Balram murders Ashok. Here, the surprising thing is that how Balram became so bold and killed Ashok. He learnt a lot from their family. The source of Balram's success is the source of Europe (West). This is the major idea of Spivak. For Spivak postcolonial identity is not completely new. The success of the postcolonial world depends on the western mode of thought. All India Radio became one of the major sources of enlightenment in Balram's life. He is quite facilitated with the means of this media as he exposes, "All India Radio is usually reliable ..." (4). Here, his ambivalent nature is quite clear because he hates western technological advancement but he is using the radio developed by the west.

Arjun Appadurai views postcolonial identity is created through globalization. He argues in favour of a, "globalization from below or grass root globalization..." (17). Appadurai's argument is that we are living in the world of globalization and global economy flourishes through grass root level. Balram, in *The White Tiger*, is successful in the global market through entrepreneurship that he started through working in the teashop, smashing coals, wiping tables and later on he became driver to Ashok and Pinky Madam and finally he became the master of a car company. In the past, he was nameless and identity less 'Munna' and now he is Ashok Sharma, a successful entrepreneur in the world of global market. Balram seems to bring change using modern technology as he views, "we drive technology forward" (301). His point is that we cannot deny technology in the process of development. Balram knows postcolonial Indian identity depends on technology and progress is outcome of technological advancement.

Exploring the identity of contemporary Caribbean society, V. S. Naipaul Argues:

A peasant-minded, money-minded community, spiritually cut off from its roots, its religion reduced to rites without philosophy set in a materialistic colonial society: A combination of historical accidents and national temperament has turned the Trinidad Indian into a complete colonial, even more philistines than the white. (89)

Naipaul finds Caribbean identity being hybridized, half native half-westernized and unsatisfactory. Postcolonial world has been spiritually cut off due to western influence. The colonizers changed India not only into a complete colonial, but it was even more philistine than the white people. Ashok and Pinky Madam are the major characters who represent colonial Europe (West). They both are the colonial agents where as Balram Halwai is postcolonial agent of a colonized nation, India. It is quite clear that Balram's past identity was quite unsatisfactory as he was suppressed by Ashok, Pinky Madam and their family. Balram protested through action against colonial values that he found in them, lived a happy life being the boss of The White Tiger car company in Bangalore. He was a simple village guy born in Laxmangarh in the past but now he has been a great boss of Bangalore.

Balram has been able to create new identity due to his strong determination and devotion in his job. He argues, "Once I was a driver to a master but now I am a master of drivers. I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling them my 'Family', either" (302). It shows Balram is not yesterday's Balram. In the past, he was servant but now he is a master. He is quite friendly and helpful master. He is the boss of car company and he gives jobs to many workers. The workers are feeling comfortable working in his company. In the past, Balram was a poor guy of Laxmangarh, a remote part and he was just a Rickshaw puller's son. Now he has been the boss in his office in Bangalore. He is, "Ashok Sharma, North entrepreneur, settled in Bangalore"(302). He is Ashok Sharma, A white Tiger of Bangalore now. The credit of this success goes to the Indians who believed in entrepreneurship through technology. Today Balram's voice has been different. He is fearlessly speaking, "I protected his good name when I was his servant, and now that I am his master, I won't stop protecting his good name" (47). It is his rebellious attitude. It shows Balram used to respect his boss in pressure or due to fear and unwillingly but now he is quite different and he regrets respecting his master in the past.

Robert Young argues, "The postcolonial describes a whole new experience of political freedom, new ideologies... development, economic freedom, self reliance and new agendas"(57). The major issues raised by young are new experience, political freedom, new ideologies, economic freedom and self dependence that are the major features of postcolonialism. In *The White Tiger*, Balram's struggle and experience is new. In post independence era, he is exercising political freedom. He fights against the attitude of Ashok and Pinky Madam, who are colonial agents and they frequently dominate him. He fights for economic independence, social justice and self reliance. Divorce of Pinky Madam with Ashok, Ashok's murder from Balram and Balram's progress after establishing his own taxi company indicates the end of colonial values and the rising status of the subaltern. Balram calls all the youths of India come forward to build the nation, "... we need more boys to come back and build India into a superpower"(104). He is quite hopeful that if all the youths believe in action then they will really bring change in India. India will be powerful only by the means of entrepreneurship. In front of his master, Balram explores his real identity, "I am a good driver. I don't smoke. I don't drink. I don't steal. I don't disrespect God. I don't disrespect my family... I don't gossip about my masters ..."(60). It shows Balram is quite responsible in his job but his master is not satisfied in his work. The narrator also blames American president as he became irresponsible in the matter of sexuality, "I blame the president of America, he has made buggery perfectly legal in his country and men are marrying other men instead of women"(305). The writer argues that there are a lot of problems even in America. America is progressing in different fields but in the matter of sexuality America is still backward because people are involving in homosexual activities. They have not been successful to manage marriage in appropriate manner. In terms of marriage, India is far more better than America.

Toni Morrison, an Afro-American critic argues, "Canon building is empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range... is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested"(8). Toni Morrison's interest is not the interest of canon building but her interest is the interest of canon defense. It shows Morrison's struggle is to create new identity among the blacks by breaking the canon building led by the whites. She found clash between blacks and whites. By making debate in every sector, whites wanted to destroy the identity of the blacks. The whites even wanted to win over the nature. In the same way, Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is the novel for canon defense not canon building. Death of Ashok and Pinky Madam's divorce indicate the collapse of canon building where as Balram's success in business is the canon defense and it is national defense as well

as the defense of subaltern. When Balram takes Ashok and Pinky Madam in shopping Mall, he is quite amazed, "I was conscious of a perfume in the air, of golden light, of cool, air-conditioned air, of people in T-Shirts and jeans who were eyeing me strangely. I saw... huge photos of handsome European men and women hanging on each wall..." (152). The sight of shopping mall becomes the power agency for Balram and he determines to do something new in his life. The shopping mall becomes source of fashion and relaxation for Ashok and Pinky Madam where as it becomes the place of learning for Balram. He develops his consciousness from the scene of shopping mall because from this place he sees the difference between subaltern and aristocrats.

Balram sees problems even in Chinese business, "Mr. Jiabao wants to meet some Indian entrepreneurs and hear the story of their success from their own lips... Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect... that you don't have entrepreneurs"(4). He means to say that India is quite forward in entrepreneurship but even China is lacking it. So the Chinese should learn about the skill of entrepreneurship from India. The writer also explores that India is quite rich in the field of spiritualism. He seems to be appreciating India as the centre of Hinduism as he explores, "see, the Muslims have one god. The Christians have three gods and we Hindus have 36000000 gods" (8). Balram's major concern, here, is that Indian identity is determined in terms of Hindu philosophy. Hinduism is quite powerful and superior than other religions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The White Tiger* proves that it is India's turn now to drive the world because India is quite forward and superpower in postcolonial world. In the past, India was driven by the British rulers and aristocrats but now it's India's turn to drive or to rule in the world as a superpower nation. Now, the voices of the subaltern cannot be suppressed. The subaltern voices are rising and the subaltern is not the servants now. They are the masters. They are the boss and they are rising through entrepreneurship. So, Arvind Adiga suggests everyone to learn the lesson of success from the struggle of Balram, an Indian subaltern through the novel *The White Tiger*.

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