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Master-Servant Relationship in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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In his famous work 'Phenomenology of Spirit' Hegel uses German phrase, '*Herrschaft*' and '*Knechtschaft*', (translated as Lordship and Bondage) to refer to the master and slave dialectics which are self-conscious two distinct being of the same person. The essence of the dialectic is the movement or motion of recognizing, in which the two self-consciousnesses are constituted each in being recognized as self-conscious by the other.

Following the story of the epistolary novel the reader comes across the relationships which exist between 'master' and 'servant' which this paper attempts to unfold. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, narrates in first person and writes exactly eight letters (Six nights and two mornings) to his Excellency Wen Jiabao, the Chinese premier, who is going to visit Bangalore in India to know the truth about the city and to meet some entrepreneurs to hear the story of their success from their own lips. Balram gets the news from All India Radio and relying on it he addresses these letters to the premier. Each letter is a single facet of the diamond that opens the plethora of the relationship between various characters in the novel. In the globalised and post-colonial world, the relationship between nations is important and while comparing the nations the protagonist says:

"You Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs." (Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* Page 4)

He admires China, Afghanistan and Abyssinia as these countries were never ruled by foreigners. He respects the love for liberty shown by Chinese and believes that the future of the world lies with yellow man and brown man. According to him, the white-skinned master has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse. Thus, the very beginning of the novel brings in the colonized, national, colored and racial consciousness into the frame that historicizes, generates and anticipates the master-slave dichotomy for a globalized village/city.

In the course of the story the reader gets to know about the protagonist family and schooling. He is from a poor family and his parents are dead because of tuberculosis. The bitter truth revealed here is although a bright student, he is forced to leave the school by his elder brother, Kishan and grand-mother Kusum to work in a tea-shop as a servant. He is simple 'Munna' (boy) till he receives the name Balram from his school master and the surname Halwai (Sweet-maker) from the caste he is born in. When the school inspector comes for inspecting, he gives him the name: 'The White Tiger' signifying rare and talented species among his creed. Thus, among the half-baked pupil of the school he stands out.

While differentiating between the bodies of the rich and the poor people the protagonist comments:

“A rich man’s body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. Ours are different. My father’s spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like dog’s collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into his buttocks. The story of a poor man’s life is written on his body, in a sharp pen.” (Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* Page 26-27)

The village life of Laxmangarh (District Gaya) is full of dark realities which stand in sharp contrast to the city-life of Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore which are lighted with different realities. The four landlords in the village are the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven. The landlords are the masters of the village and everyone submit to their wishes as they are economically, socially, politically and culturally strong. Although, there is a tension in the relationship between the master and servant as one of the Buffalo’s son is kidnapped by the Naxals (communist who shoot rich people on principle), the bondage or ruling does not end here.

There are other aspect of politics and economics in the village life. Vijay, the bus conductor and the hero of childhood life of the protagonist, also undergoes from being a servant to rise up as a socialist politician in the course of the novel. The corrupt life of the great socialist politics in the village is shown to tell the truth about the election where the same party dominates through the mechanism set to sustain it. The schoolmaster selling of the uniforms of the school children to get his unpaid salary is remarked as a Gandhian protest. The murder of the faithful voter in the police stampede is an act of showing how the dominant are supported by the system in this country. To summarize the argument, the protagonist says:

“In the old days there were one thousand castes and destines in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.

And only two destines: eat – or get eaten up” (Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* Page 64)

The protagonist travels to Dhanbad from the village of Laxmangarh after promising the grand-mother that he will send her money at the end of every month as she had given him money to learn driving lesson. He searches in various mansions and quarters to find an employment which ends when the Storks accept him as a second driver on a meager salary. He is forced to work not only as a driver but also as a cook, a gardener, a caretaker of the domestic animals and behaves like a slave-servant as he is driven by the need of money at home. The attitude and treatment given to him by the storks is considered kind by him. He is happy enjoying his meals, clothing and shelter (the basic needs). He prays and works tirelessly to retain the same. This brings out the domesticated and culturally evolved violence of the masters towards the servant and his non-violating modes of accepting it. Thus, the master is always right even if he is going to butcher you (‘the attitude of rooster- coop’ as the narrator put it) gets settled in the psyche. As he puts it:

“The trustworthiness of the servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy.” (Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* Page 175)

While talking about the rooster –coop he states:

“Go to Old Delhi, behind Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pocking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space: the whole cage giving off a horrible stench – the stench of

terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They know they're next. Yet they do not try to get out of the coop.

The very same thing is done with human being in this country.” (Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* page 173-174)

Now, there are two driver-servants in the Stork family and there is a tension between them as each wants to serve the master well and become their favorite. The servant-servant relationship is won over by the second servant Balram when he follows the first servant Ramprasad to the masque one day that reveals the truth about his Muslim identity which he had hidden from the masters. The identity once revealed the second servant becomes the first and the only driver servant. Ramprasad is forced by politics played on him by Balram to leave the service quietly and without a word. The protagonist feels sorry for him but then he is happy at the end of the day as he will be the only driver to take the master to Delhi in Honda city car.

Once in Delhi, his masters stay in an apartment of Buckingham Towers B Block, the protagonist serves the masters with absolute fidelity although he stays in a cockroach filled room in the basement. When he is asked to take the blame (by forced signing of the confession letter) of the road accident in which Pinky madam had killed a child while driving rashly under the effect of alcohol at night, he accept the wish and command of his masters without questioning them but rather thinking about the prison conditions he will have to stay in. Although in this hit and run case the protagonist is not put behind bar as there is no witness of the incident and his masters have bribed the police, he becomes conscious of the corrupt, selfish and inhumanly attitude of the master towards him.

When Pinky madam ask the protagonist to drive her to airport without questioning her one night, which marks the end of their four years of marriage life, he is unnecessarily blamed by his master Ashok for their broke down. He hits Ashok in the chest for the first time when he tries to attack him. The first symptom of breaking the master-servant relationship is highlighted to forecast the coming end of the slavery and a movement from dependence to independence. He ponders about it in the following words:

“Why did I feel that I had to go close to his feet, touch them and press them and make them feel good – why? Because the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into Mother Ganga.” (Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* Page 195)

The change of place from the village of Laxmangarh to Dhanbad, from Dhanbad to Delhi and from Delhi to Bangalore is a journey from darkness in India to light in India as he himself calls it. Balram is an obedient, master-loving driver-servant who had cared and followed every command of his master not only in Dhanbad but also in Delhi. He talks about the Great Indian Rooster Coop working in following manner:

“Never Before in human history have so few owned so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent – as strong, as talented as intelligent in every way – to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back it back at you with a curse.”(Adiga, Arvind *The White Tiger* Page 176)

Hereafter, the rest of the narrative is sad tale of how a sweet, innocent village fool is corrupted into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness. He murders his master, Mr. Ashok, with a empty bottle of wine and runs away with the cash in the red bag (of Rupees Seven hundred thousand exactly) in Delhi to break shackles from the rooster-coop and become a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore.

After reaching to Bangalore, with train changing to escape detection and catch for the act of murder and stealing, the protagonist starts a new career as an entrepreneur of white tiger taxi service. He is master of his own fate from now on. He thinks that his family must have been massacred by the storks, the price he had to pay to get out of the Rooster Coop.

Balam learns the bitter truth about Indian life living his life both as a servant (Social entrepreneur) and master (Business entrepreneur). After the murder, he lives a fugitive life with the money in the red bag that provides him a chance to start the new whiter tiger taxi service. In this dialectic (Thesis, antithesis and synthesis) of his journey from servant to the employer there are changes and differences of attitude and treatment given to Balam and by Ashok Sharma (Balam changes his name to settle in Bangalore) before and after in this tale of turn taking of master-servant relationship.

When one of his drivers of his taxi service named Mohammad Asif hits a boy on the bicycle in the night which leads to the death of the boy, he manages it (both with the police and the dead boy's parents). He knows that he has committed a crime but thinks that he will never be caught for the act and will never say that he had made a mistake that night when he slit the master's throat. Balam, now Ashok Sharma, the anti-hero, does not believe in fictional truth, movies and newspaper stories of getting caught in the act of murder and stealing but rather in dark realities of escaping, surviving and living a better life. In the end, he wants to shift to real estate business and start a English language school.

Thus, master and servant relationship takes various turn and complete one of the many circles in the journey and evolution of the protagonist through the plot of the novel. There are various other issues related to Indian social, psychological, politics, economics, religious and culture etc... life which are dealt out in the course of the novel that this paper has not attempted to unfold.

To sum up, the reader is left wondered and surprised by the dark tale which has rightly won the prestigious man Booker award of 2008 and agrees with the philosopher [Robert Brandom](#) who while Speaking about Hegel's master-slave dialectics explains,

"Hegel's discussion of the dialectic of the Master and Slave is an attempt to show that asymmetric precognitive relations are metaphysically defective, that the norms they institute aren't the right kind to help us think and act with--to make it possible for us to think and act. Asymmetric recognition in this way is authority without responsibility, on the side of the Master, and responsibility without authority, on the side of the Slave. And Hegel's argument is that unless authority and responsibility are commensurate and reciprocal, no actual normative statuses are instituted. This is one of his most important and certainly one of his deepest ideas, though it's not so easy to see just how the argument works."

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