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The Subaltern Can Speak: A Study of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This paper offers a study of the postcolonial issues- power, violence, justice, and resistance in Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*. Through the character of Balram Halwai Adiga projects the plight of the lower class people of India and the resistance they need to register for survival. Balram's journey from a poverty-stricken villager to a respectable businessman epitomizes the rise of the subalterns and the subversion of social, economic and political structure. He realized that to get emancipation from the age-old traps of class and caste in Indian socio-economic fabric one must rebel and assert his or her subjectivity. Balram serves as the mouthpiece of the subaltern people who have never been allowed to speak. Balram speaks and gives voice to the voiceless through his act of self-actualization. Adiga deconstructs the discourse of power, justice and resistance in the novel that earned him the Booker prize (2008).

Keywords: Postcolonial; Resistance; Subaltern; Subjectivity; Deconstruct; Discourse.

1. Introduction

This paper makes a critical study of Arvind Adiga's Booker winning novel *The White Tiger* from postcolonial perspective. Adiga incorporates various subaltern issues in his novel that captures the attention of the critics and theorists who are engaged with the issues of subaltern politics and recolonization. Through the portrayal of the character, Balram Halwai Adiga lends voice to the marginalized section of Indian population, who are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation. Adiga not only portrays the predicaments of the underprivileged people but also offer some ways of emancipation for them through the journey of Balram from a village simpleton to a successful entrepreneur.

2. Story of Power, Injustice and Resistance

Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel, embodies the lower class struggling to be released from age-old suppression and exploitation. He is the son of a rickshaw puller, who gets his name from his teacher as he is called Munna. His journey from a poor village boy to a reputed entrepreneur has never been smooth but a difficult struggle to get emancipation from the clutches of class system. As a representative of "India of Darkness" his battle starts at a very tender age when his parents borrow money from village landlord known as Storck for the wedding of his cousin sister Reena. As a result of which everyone of Balram's family had to work for Storck and Balram was compelled to leave his school and started crushing coal and wiping tables at tea shop where he derives "better education" than "at any school" of life and its dark realities. While working at tea shop, he nurtures a hope of release from the confinement he is plunged into. He feels he is not born to live this sort of life. The rebel in him shouts, "I was destined not to stay as slave". He also found a strong inspiration in his father who says, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one of my mines- at least one one-should live like a man". In quest of self-actualization Balram and his brother leave Laxmangarah for Gaya and then to Delhi. Balram started working as chauffeur to Storck's son Ashok Sharma and daughter-in-law Pinky Madam. In the complex city life Balram's real journey begins. He utilizes every opportunity to show his devotion to his master and gradually wins his favour. His loyalty is manifest when he declares, "I would drive whenever they wanted, as faithfully as the servant God Hanuman carried about his

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Master and mistress, Ram and Sita.” But the sheer irony is that as a reward of his honesty and loyalty, he is compelled to confess the crime committed by Pinky Madam. Balram becomes one of those numerous drivers and servants who are forced to take onus of the crimes their masters have committed. In this concern Balram rightly says, “The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters” Adiga says, “Doesn’t the driver’s family protest? Far from it. They would actually go about bragging. Their boy Balram had taken the fall, gone to Tihar jail for his employer. He was loyal as dog. He was the perfect servant.” Balram finds himself trapped by the bars of class, caste, and poverty. He identifies his situation to the Rooster Coop: “The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they they’re next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. the very same thing is done with the humans in this country”. The rooster coop symbolizes the oppressed, confined and helpless plight of the lower class Indian people. People in Laxmangarh are worshippers of Hanuman because, “He is shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love and devotion”. Balram realizes that he cannot survive unless he rebels against the establishment. Balram does not wish to remain as a ‘rooster’ in the coop. The White Tiger throws light on the conventional mindset of the rich. The poor and the lower classes in this country are supposed to serve their masters. Ashok tells his wife,

“We have got people to take care of us- here our drivers, our watchmen, our masseurs, and where in New York will you find someone to bring tea and sweets biscuits while you are still in the bed, the way Ram Bahadur does for us?”

The underprivileged section of this country has been relegated to the fringes. They are exposed to various forms of exploitation by myriad forms of hegemonic forces. But unfortunately they are either not aware of that or if aware not dare to rise in protest against it. Adiga deftly sketches the realities of the city of Delhi and its impact on the growth of Balram’s mental development. In India’s capital the horizon of his mind broadens. He comes in contact with fellow drivers and his reading of popular crime fictions spark ideas in his brain. He urge to escape from the claustrophobic existence becomes more acute. He hatches plans to get out of his hellish predicament. With the objective of dismantling the disparity between the “Big Bellies” and “Small Bellies” and to be released from the age-old exploitation, Balram kills his gullible master Ashok Sharma and flees with the bag loaded with money to start a new life in Bangalore as entrepreneur running a taxi service to BPO’s. This is the only way, Balram thought, would give him the life he has been denied so far. Adiga makes it clear why Balram Halwai writes to the Chinese premier. Balram realizes that” the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white skinned man has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse”. Balram’s love and admiration for individual liberty makes him say, “It is said that you Chinese are great lovers of freedom and individual liberty. The British tried to

make you their servants, but you never let them do it”.

3. Conclusion

Adiga’s *The White Tiger* narrates the story of an oppressed, Balram Halwai and his journey towards self-definition. The novel highlights the murky aspect of our country, which is often eclipsed by the sound and fury of ‘Shining India’. Adiga offers a space to the marginalized people whose voice often gets silenced. He presents the struggle and the ultimate resistance of the underprivileged class. Balram has been a member of the downtrodden class but he wants to feel like a master “just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute what it means not be a servant”. Balram’s battle represents the struggle of the downtrodden class for emancipation from social, economic, and cultural restrictions forcefully imposed on them by the ruling class. Balram Halwai emerges as the hope in the lives of the hopeless. He serves as a strong voice of the underdogs who want to get a place in life and shakes the very base of the social structure. His fight for self-definition and aspiration to shift his position from periphery to the center is really inspiring. His evolution symbolizes the evolution of the marginalized. Balram shows the way towards success and stirs hopes in the underdogs. Balram’s resistance and act of subverting the system is significant for the rise of the subalterns. Balram Halwai is the representative of the shifting mindset of the oppressed people who are no longer ready to live in the darkness of poverty but want to deconstruct the age old class hierarchy and to script a new narrative for themselves.

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