

Postmodernism: Analysing Arvind Aadiga's The White Tiger

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Abstract

Lytard broke the incredulity about mythic narratives that have been canonized in the great literary tradition of West. He resisted the idea of universalizing all the narratives into one single packet or category of ultimate objectives like growth, development, progress, triumph et al. His assertion to replace meta-narratives with *petits récits* can be traced in Arvind Adiga's Booker Prize winning text *The White Tiger* (2008). The novel foregrounds the elements of 'narcissism' in narrative technique, that is, it focuses and debates its end proving protagonist's life a paradox itself. It blends the strictly rigid structures of high and low class, making the text a hybrid product. An underdog who resuscitates and embarks on his quest to lead a stately life as "an entrepreneur" and as "a thinking man" make the text revisit past with the irony of hierarchal order being not only broken down but also its rigid boundaries being blurred with a man moving in and out of it. Adiga's novel talks about all these issues at a time when a majority of people have busied themselves in the celebration of a new emerging, and shining India. Present research is a study of Adiga's "little narratives" revolving around the protagonist, Balram, who breaks totalitarian structures and revel in boulevards which are otherwise censored, through a postmodernist lens.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Arvind Aadiga, The White Tiger, Decentralization, Disruption, Dislocation, Indeterminacy, Enlightenment, Narcissism.

Ae dil hai mushakil jeena yahaan

Zara hat ke zara bach ke

Yeh hai Bambai meri jaan

Kahin building kahin trame

Kahin motor kahin mill

Milata hai yaha sab kuch

Ik milata nahin dil

(C.I.D. 1956)

This popular Hindi song, "Ae Dil hai Mushkil Jeena Yahaan" sung by Geeta Dutt and Mohammad Rafi from the film C.I.D describes postmodernism at its best in India. In this song, Jhonny Walker is wandering around the city and parades along Marine drive and sings about how tough and heartless the city is. He sings that one can find anything in this city of future, and dreams but one cannot find love, simple, humane love here.

There is no space for poor and downtrodden in this entirely late-capitalist culture of the city, which exploits them. He mocks at skyscrapers, and those who live in these high towers are called murderers of paupers. The song carries the postmodernist feeling of decentralization, disruption, dislocation, indeterminacy, and anti-totalization.

Postmodernism is usually incorporated with disavowing prefixes like – dis, de, in, anti which makes it a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges, as says Frederic Jameson that the value of postmodern expression lies precisely in its attempt to name the unnamable. The term designates a bewilderingly diverse array of ‘little narratives’ as well as a broader epistemic sense of crisis in the foundational philosophical and political discourses of the European Enlightenment.

The postmodern ‘mood’ began to gather in the 1960s when changes in western societies with the emergence of post-industrialization; increased technologization; expanding consumerism and ‘lifestyle niche’ advertising; widening democracy and access to secondary and higher education; the growth of youth and sub-cultures; the global spread of information technology, mass media and the ‘knowledge’ industries; the retreat from both colonialism and utopianism in politics and the rise of new identity politics around race, gender and sexuality coincided with changes in literary and artistic expression pop art, anti-modernism in architecture, self-reflexivity in literature and with a new skepticism towards science and positivism in thought.

The changes gradually seemed to add up to both a rejection of modernism and a disillusionment with, and hence repudiation of, Enlightenment and post- Enlightenment rationalist ideas about the unity of the self, the concept of universal justice in politics, the role of the state, the idea of underlying laws of history, the possibility of certainty in thought and science. Broadly, postmodernism can be understood as a gradual encroachment of the aesthetic into the spheres of philosophy, ethics and, most recently, science; a gradual displacement of discovery, depth, truth, correspondence and coherence with construction, surface, functionality, self-reflexive narrative and ironic fragmentation: realism giving way to idealism and then to an all-pervasive textualism.

The term ‘postmodernism’ was first used in the 1950s by literary critics to describe new kinds of literary experiment arising out of, but moving beyond, the terms of aesthetic modernism. By the

early eighties, however, the term had shifted from the description of a range of aesthetic practices involving ‘double-coding’, playful irony, parody, parataxis, self-consciousness, fragmentation and the mixing and meshing of high and popular culture, to a use which encompassed a more general shift in thought and which seemed to register a pervasive cynicism towards the progressivism ideals of modernity.

By 1979, when Lyotard published his influential book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, new and burgeoning forms of epistemological and cultural relativism were already well out of their infancies. Truth, Knowledge, Self, and Value were no longer to be regarded as foundational categories, but as rhetorical constructions masking relations of power and strategies of oppression and marginalization. A key concept in *The Postmodern Condition* is “metanarrative,” or “grand” or “master” narrative. Lyotard uses the term to refer to the overarching mythic narratives that individual and societies use to structure knowledge and legitimate truth-claims. A metanarrative locates a current situation, whether individual or communal, within a larger narrative structure that plots movement toward some ultimate objective—progress, a triumph of reason, victory of the proletariat, redemption, etc.

Lyotard asserts that metanarratives are being replaced by a proliferation of *petits récits*, “little stories” or testimonies that draw attention to the particular as opposed to the universal, that is, to local events, individual experiences, heterodox ideas, and other practices and narratives that are not included in the predominant metanarratives. Within the postmodern condition, a newly found interest in difference and dissension challenges the drive toward homogeneity Lyotard describes as “totalitarian.” Back home in the year 2008 Indian writer Aravind Adiga too went against the grain, waged war against totality, and served the reader with non-presentable. Lyotard in one of his last works, *Hyphen* argues that the hyphen in “Judeo-Christian” marks the subsumption of Judaism within Christianity. Along the similar lines, Adiga questions the subsumption of all the Indians into one category of shinning and developing India devoid of their class, economic status, and conditions of living.

Adiga wrote for about 1.2 billion people of India in an epistolary form ranging in seven letters written to Wen Jiabao, The Premier of China, who is visiting India to address entrepreneurs of India. Balram Halwai, “the white tiger,” informs Mr. Premier about India’s grappling situation and explains the truth behind India’s soon to be world’s biggest economy image. In extraordinarily simplistic words, he informs about the ground reality of uneven distribution of economic growth rate and how it its decline further burdens poor. Balram shares his life narrative, his journey from a servant at a teashop in Laxmangarh to an “entrepreneur,” thus telling a tale of “half-baked” men of India. It breaks illusionary, and stereotypical narrative manipulation rather creates multiple interpretations of its inconsistencies and contradictions.

Adiga scrutinizes all the institutions from schools to religion, from police to government. He informs how everyone judges through money in your pocket. Balram who was initially dejected about how he shall make big in the new city Bangalore until he realized, “I had thousands on my side” (Adiga 299). Further, even the problem of language was solved as Balram remarks, “the moment you show cash, everyone knows your language” (Adiga 300). He bares all the unspoken and illusionist conventions to challenge institutions in which the art finds a home and a meaning.

He transgresses the boundary of arts, of genres itself which makes *The White Tiger* a postmodernist text like no other.

Balram in his description of his school days and his teacher Mr. Krishna tells the reader about “half-baked men” of India. Although they went to school they never gain an education or any information from there, which could help them later in their life. Balram was an inquisitive boy but, the government agents ate all the resources, which should have been provided to him, and his teacher Mr. Krishna gulped down whatever was left. All that has been taught to him is incomplete in every sense and the final act of dropping out of school completes the education of a “Half-Baked Indian.” Balram says, “all these ideas, half-formed and half-digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head... make more half-formed ideas, and this

is what you act on and live with another institution, which has been rendered, of its ideological apparatus is religion.

In the very beginning of the text, he mockingly asks which god’s “arse” he should kiss before starting. He calls river Ganga- the black river. He believes wherever this holy river full of feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion and industrial acid flows, brings darkness. He compares the black river with ocean, associating former with India of Darkness and the latter with India of Light. The river Ganga that is called the mother of all Indians is ridiculed here because of its current state of pollution. A similarity can be observed between the black river flowing to the ocean in its final course and Balram alias Munna too moving to a city of light near ocean, i.e., Bangalore. He further pokes at the image of Lord Hanuman as a god symbolic of service to one’s master with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion. He presents his view that such a phase of God-worship and devotion is gone in this century where people are ready to slit each other’s throat both metaphorically and figuratively to rise in the social ladder. Adiga challenges India’s so-called biggest democracy of the world image. In this democracy, the candidate of the Great Socialist Party is charged with ninety- three criminal cases like murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-smuggling, etc. There is a complete chain of con men starting from the teashop owner who sold off the voters to the property owners and businesspersons who bribe these politicians and minister’s sidekicks to help them cracking off all kinds of deals. Above that even after committing numerous crimes, ministers continue to be in power even in jail. The involvement of people is confined to a discussion at teashops and remarks like those, that Chinese system of governance is much better than ours is.

Police, a repressive social apparatus acts as an aid to all the men with money. The two road accidents- one by Pinky Madam and other by Mohammad Asif that occur in the novel were easily silenced off with the help of lawyers and police officers and wads of cash. This account of a subaltern’s life has taken off clothes of power. Balram’s father died of tuberculosis because of an absence of doctor in the hospital. A dark picture of India where in place of

a doctor one could find only a register indicating his presence and in place of hospitals, only foundation stones are to be found. Also, the villages which are projected as paradises of India but in reality, they lack basic amenities like electricity, drinking water, sanitation, and even food. Chiefly, it is home to two types of people- property owners and laborers, i.e., the oppressors and the oppressed.

Adiga has not only subverted the boundaries of narrative and genre but also the social margins where a subaltern speaks about the shinning India, its economic growth, and decline, its democratic system, its darkness, its glamour, its real face which keeps on changing every minute. His voice is full of pity, wit, and sycophancy. He is not only writing about his own life but also about all the “human spiders,” rickshaw pullers, laborers who build up the city of steel and glass even in the right, the slum dwellers, and the servant community at large. Besides revealing the reality of rich Indians, he focuses on the integrity of marginalized Indians through the imagery of the Rooster Coop where each of the hen or rooster is killed by the butcher before the other roosters, but none dares to escape. The living shadow of darkness is very well projected in the following lines:

Go to Old Delhi...and look at the way they keep chicken there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire mesh cages. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. “They do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (Adiga 173-174)”

Every statement of Balram draws the reader into darkness and compels to think about the emotional and psychological state of lower class people like driver, servants, guards, and rickshaw-pullers. None of his statements can be challenged by the reader, or the great and grand narrative of India built up by nationalist writers post-independence, who called India “Vishwa guru,” the image lies shattered down in small pieces reflecting the image of people like Balram Halwai. The uneven growth that is going on in the name of development is turning men into animals, cities into concrete jungles and every moment morality and humaneness are declining.

The border between literary genres is fluid in this

text like Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* in which the novel merges with history. Here the text can be called a novel, an autobiography of a “Half- Baked Indian” annotated with a voice of the writer-narrator in an epistolary form. It also works with the conventions of both literary realism and journalistic facticity. Sometimes while reading the text, the reader gets confused whether Balram made the statement as an independent character or the writer is using him as his mouthpiece. Like a characteristic postmodern text, it refuses the omniscience and omnipresence of the third person and engages instead in a dialogue between a narrative voice and a projected reader. Jerzy Kosinski calls this postmodern form of writing “auto fiction”: “fiction because all memory is fictionalizing; “auto” because it is, for him, “a literary genre, generous enough to let the author adopt the nature of his fictional protagonist, not the way around.”

Adiga’s use of the first-person narrative not only provided the much-sought push to Balram’s statements. Adiga himself says, “I wanted things in the book to correspond to reality, but filtered through Balram’s views” (The Tribune, 19-10-2008). In *The White Tiger*, the novelist employs a narrative, which is episodic in the first half of the novel. Through flashbacks, readers are introduced to the nameless and meaningless existence of the protagonist. While referring to his name, ‘Balram Halwai’ alias Munna the narrator takes the readers back to his first day at school and narrate the incident when the teacher named him Balram for “Munna” just meant a boy. He tells the reality dialogically:

‘Didn’t your mother name you?’

‘She’s very ill, sir. She lies in bed and spews blood. She’s

got no time to name me.’

‘And your father?’

‘He’s a rickshaw-puller, sir. He’s got no time to name me.’

‘Don’t you have a granny? Aunts? Uncles?’

‘They have got no time either.’

Adiga’s narrative style oozes of wit, panache and dark humor. In a simple style, the narrator explores his past- his anger, suffering, humiliation and detachment- and along with it the contemporary

version of a history of the land and the people. He reveals his crime in an exceptionally innocent way- "Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat." (Adiga 48) The secret of his innovative style lies in juxtaposing an insignificant act of spitting on the hill top and the heinous act of slitting one's master's throat. The link between the two lies in the strong hatred generated in his mind against his master. He even surpassed his fear of lizard or cow and expressed his hatred through spitting, whistling and humming. There takes place a complete subversion in the text where a subaltern does not speak but acts in the most violent way possible.

The addressee of the letters being a foreigner, the writer is allowed to distract the readers from his story now and then to reflect on matters that are purely Indian and cannot be understood by a foreigner unless well interpreted. Sometimes these reflections even take the shape of short essays. For example, as the protagonist starts describing his birthplace, a small village of Laxmangarh in the district of Gaya, he leaves his story for a while to brief the Chinese Premier of the historical importance of Gaya. This gives the novel an episodic touch, fragmented incidents and narratives all bound in one.

This is not just a historical reference. The very description of Lord Buddha running through the village of Laxmangarh and never looking back again- a witty remark combining humor and satire- is a fine example of Adiga's use of irony, the essence of his narrative art. The area that is referred to as Darkness was the very place where the Great Enlightenment took place. How can this area be dark unless the source of light chooses to run through the area without looking back at it again!

Another irony can be witnessed in the identity construction of the protagonist. He started as Munna (a little boy) and was named Balram by his teacher. Ironically, a man whose family did not have time enough to name him got some names at the different stage of life. This ill-fed, ill-clad and poor child proves worth to his name "the white tiger" towards the end by escaping from the great Rooster Coop. The whole life of the protagonist is an irony and paradox. He was meant to be a servant his whole life became a master of sixteen drivers and moved from darkness to light. This is Balram Halwai, an anti-

hero a "White Tiger" in the novel. The way a white tiger is a rare creature in the jungle so is a village boy who can read and write in the village school. He earns this sobriquet from the school inspector who is principally impressed by Balram's learning and intelligence.' '...The creature that comes only once in a generation. The White Tiger. That is what you are in this jungle' (Adiga 35)

Intertextuality is a central concern of Postmodernist study. Many allusions and references can be traced in the novel *The White Tiger* that makes the novel multi-layered and endows it with different levels of meaning. The title that Balram gives to the story of his life "The autobiography of a Half Baked Indian" brings with it the allusion of another autobiography written by the famous writer Nirad Chaudhari that he published in 1951. Chaudhari's book relates the life-story of the author, the mental, intellectual development of the self- confessed anglophile writer. While the "Autobiography of an Unknown Indian" observes the changing historical situation, at the time when the British were leaving India, the 'autobiography of a Half Baked Indian' narrates the moral decline squalor that set in the country after independence.

Another instance of Intertextuality can be found in the professional dealing between Mr. Ashok and politicians regarding their mines, which reminds the reader of the 'coalgate' scam going on at the time of writing of the novel. Mr. Ashok is always complaining about his business yet he goes from one bank to another to withdraw cash to feed ever-hungry politicians. He also mentions a sleazy magazine named *Murder Weekly*, which is contrasted to cellophane covered magazines read by rich people. *Murder Weekly* contains stories of rape, revenge and sexual drama. Servants read such fiction but seldom has a servant learned to kill his master from them.

Balram's description of his planning and plotting his master's murder is analogous to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Rodion Raskolnikov, an impoverished student, plans the murder of an old hag. The technique used by the two is same as both of them first practice cerebrally and then rehearse the crime. Both the protagonists were in a state of delusion before the commitment of a crime. While Delhi, the city, speaks to Balram and he

spends sleepless nights repeating the same thought in his mind like a trance, Rodion too moves about the city in a somewhat similar state though his condition is much severe than Balram. Balram had a smooth exit from the guilt of murder, but Rodion needed Sophia to come out of the abyss.

Adiga also confessed the influence of Ralph Ellison's novel "The Invisible Man" to his work. The stories of the two novels have their parallels. In *The Invisible Man*, the narrator begins with the claim that he is an "invisible man." His invisibility, he says, is not a physical condition—he is not invisible—but is rather the result of the refusal of others to see him. He says, because of his invisibility, he has been hiding from the world, living underground, and stealing electricity from the Monopolated Light & Power Company. He burns 1,369 light bulbs simultaneously and listens to Louis Armstrong "What Did I Do to Be So" on a phonograph.

He tells the reader that he has gone underground to write the story of his life and invisibility. The similarities between the two narratives are discernable. Balram and his lot are also an invisible as there is nobody in the world who is concerned about them. Balram, the insignificant man from the land of 'darkness,' also sits under a huge chandelier in his 150 square feet office in Bangalore to write out the story of his life and to reveal to the Chinese Premier the sordid reality of the so-called democracy. By writing these letters to the Chinese Premier, he is asserting his identity and his place in the society.

Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality highlights the importance of and the formative influences that other texts have in shaping a particular work. It is not other works of literature but other texts such as films, advertisements, and media whose presence can be noticed in the novel. In the novel, intertextual elements can be discerned in many of its situations and episodes. Ram Persad, the senior driver of Mr. Ashok, is shown praying religiously to more than "twenty" idols and chant "Om Om" while performing his pujas every morning. (77) One morning at pre-dawn, Balram, finds him chopping onion and gets suspicious. He had also noticed that Ram Persad was not eating any of the nice lunch that his masters provided for a few days. Finding this to be dubious, he follows him and discovers that he

is a Muslim who was fasting as it was the month of Ramadan and also finds him offering Namaz.

This arrangement was a well-kept secret between the Nepali security guard and Ram Persad who had assumed a Hindu name and identity to get the job. The situation and the entire episode finds a clear parallel in the iconic movie "Chachi 420" where a Muslim character Shiraz takes up a job of a cook with as Pandit Shivraj Sharma with a similar powerful master Durgaprasad. In a near parallel Durgaprasad's secretary, Banwarilal, find out the truth in a similar fashion. One can read the movie "Chachi 420" as an intertext for the novel.

Reference to the cinema can be found from the very beginning of the novel. "I no longer watch Hindi Films" (Adiga 5) to the last pages "It's one of the reasons I have stopped going to Hindi films" (Adiga 313) the novel it seems is framed by these two remarks. The novel contains many references to Balaram's love for cinema "everyone goes to Mumbai in the films after they kill someone" (Adiga 297) and so on. He also mentions a man on cycle who roams around the teashop in his village with a poster of a pornographic film tied to the back of his cycle. "A cinema across the river showed such films every night...featuring golden-haired women". Another remark comes from Balram when he gapes at the cost of a movie ticket at PVR Saket.

Another intertextual reference that can be discerned in the formation of the novel is another popular Hindi movie, which was released around the same time as the novel. The discussion that the drivers and the chauffeurs have when their masters are away shopping and the gossip that they share is again a part of the famous film "Page 3" by Madhur Bhandarkar. The chauffeurs while waiting for the masters, who are either at a party or a discotheque or shopping, spend the time discussing the personal lives of their masters, reading sleazy magazines and other such activities. The film weaves its way into the text of the novel enriching it. The drivers also serve liquor to their master while driving which is again a part of the novels' narrative.

The novel also mentions Muslim poets like Rumi, Iqbal, Mirza Ghalib and a fourth poet whose name Balram has forgotten. This proves Balram's statement that he is a self-taught man who has learned

majorly as an eavesdropper and by listening to other's conversation at the teashop, pavements, etc. He also quotes Iqbal, "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world." Another couplet, which he learned from a bookseller in Daryaganj appositely, describes his mental condition, which he recites repeatedly:

I was looking for the key for years

But the door was always open.

Adiga has also parodied 'India Shinning' campaign run by Indian government during 2004-5 elections. India Shinning was a marketing slogan referring to the overall feeling of economic optimism in India in 2004. (India shining campaign, wiki) The slogan initially developed as part of an Indian government campaign intended to promote India internationally. The government spent an estimated \$20 million US Dollars of government funds on national television advertisements and newspaper ads featuring the "India Shinning" slogan. The phrase 'shining India' is repeatedly used in the novel.

The novel foregrounds the elements of 'narcissism' in narrative technique as it focuses on and debates its ends and processes, and thereby, 'de-naturalise' their content. Towards the end when Balram enthusiastically celebrates his journey from the Darkness to Light, it creates a paradox as the reader asks if he has done that. The Rooster Coop that he claims to have freed himself from is not annihilated, rather he has moved from one coop to another which can further lead him existential crisis like that of his master Ashok. Mr. Ashok once remarked that he wants to be free of his miserable life and wants to lead a life like that of his servant Balram. He even goes with Balram to the place where he lives, where he eats etc. Ironically, Balram wants to lead a lifestyle that his master enjoys. The ultimate truth is that both of them are stuck in their coops and at the end, Balram has not only swapped his master's name but also his coop.

Though he claims that he has moved from Darkness to Light, but the reader doubts it. On the face of it, one may feel that Gaya or Bihar at large is full darkness because of its underdeveloped conditions while Bangalore seems to be a paragon of shining India. Nevertheless, in reality, both the places have its share of darkness and light.

For property owners like Stork, Raven, Buffalo, etc. places like Laxmangarh or Dhanbad are light because they are receiving all sorts of benefits from it- financial, sexual, political et al. When Balram becomes an entrepreneur Bangalore becomes light for him because now he is no longer at the receiving end. The truth is the poor always remain in the dark whether it is Gaya, Dhanbad or Bangalore. Light is only for those who have risen above the level of poverty and no longer pay attention to moral issues.

Chandeliers that are mentioned some times in the novel is a proof of the above statement. For instance, a murderer who is on the search list of police is freely sitting under a chandelier all the time, instead of hiding in the dark. It seems commitment of a crime has bestowed him with fearlessness and money has given him a license to face the world confidently. A fan blade cutting the light of a chandelier gives gaudy relief to him and he reveals his crime in the easiest manner.

Balram talks about his dreams in the last few pages of the novel. He expresses his wish to embark on new and less traveled paths like real estate, housing, etc. and his ultimate dream to open a school for children where they would be taught life skills and shall not be made to learn books by rote. This desire arises from his unfulfilled desire to study and become a good man. He believes in practical education more than the theoretical one as he believes that entrepreneurs can be made only that way. The rest who tread the beaten path remain stuck in the rooster for their whole lives. The song "Ae Dil hai mushakil jeena yahan" (C.I.D) perfectly suits here as one is unable to find peace in the jungle where men have become animal and have lost his humaneness in this wilderness.

Adiga's novel discusses a plethora of issues like education system in India, economic development, corruption, poverty, etc. he projects all these issues with great honesty and invokes all the necessary elements of a postmodernist text. What gives this text a postmodernist essence is not only intertextuality, black humor, irony, pastiche, a fluidity of genres, narrative technique but also, the fact that the downtrodden, the haves-not, the subaltern, the marginalized have found a voice through it. This

voice reverberated in all nooks and corners of the world and brought one of the most prestigious awards, Man Booker Prize to India.

There is one question that intrigues me is why is it that Indian works get recognition at an international level only when the artist bares it all? Why is it a brutal and raw description of Slumdog Millionaire or The White Tiger or Masaan bring accolades! Does an artist put his or her best foot forward only when they criticize India's socioeconomic, political conditions? Or, is it Occident's choice of literature produced by Orient that carries some glitch? We need to find answers to such questions. However, my discussion is taking a post-colonialist turn yet we need to counter these questions to understand postmodernism and other literary theories better.

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