

The Legacy of Colonialism and the Struggle for Identity: Postcolonial Trauma in Aravind Adiga's the White Tiger

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Abstract

Postcolonial trauma, refers to the enduring psychological and social scars left by colonialism and its aftermath. In postcolonial contexts, trauma manifests in various forms personal, communal and cultural. It often results from systematic violence, displacement and historical injustices imposed by the colonizers. The purpose of the study is to focus on postcolonial trauma, and to describe how the lasting affects of colonialism permeate the narrative, shaping characters, identities and their societal struggles. Aravind Adiga's Man Booker Prize winning novel The White Tiger (2008) presents realistic image of modern India. It is a saga of man's voyage to freedom. Through the protagonist Balram Halwai, Adiga examines the psychological trauma that arises from navigating these inequalities, particularly for those trapped in the "darkness" of poverty and servitude. This novel critiques both the colonial past and postcolonial present, illustrating the deep psychological scars left by colonialism and the ongoing struggle for autonomy and recognition in a globalizing India.

Keywords: Postcolonial Trauma, Systematic Violence, Historical Injustices, Societal Struggles

European colonial powers invaded, occupied and exploited a huge global area for centuries. During the twentieth century, they covered a vast area that included parts of Africa, Asia, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the Caribbean Islands and Ireland. The English people colonised and established their culture in countries like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In India and Nigeria, they introduced their culture by compelling and imposing their institutions and norms. Indian independence in 1947 marked the postcolonial era. Adiga was born in Chennai on 23rd October 1974. He immigrated to Australia at the age of fifteen. He studied at Columbia University and Magdalen College, Oxford. After returning to India he pursued his career as a journalist and also worked with Time magazine. As a prolific writer he wrote many articles in Indian and western publications. He also

reviewed Oscar and Lucinda by Peter Carey, a Booker Prize winning book and got it published in the Second Circle, an online literary journal. Adiga has published five novels. His first novel *The White Tiger* (2008) won the Man Booker Prize. His second novel *Between the Assassinations* (2009). His third novel *Amnesty* (2020). He has also written four short stories which includes “The Sultan’s Battery” (2008), “Smack” (2008), “Last Christmas in Bandra” (2008) and “The Elephant” (2009). By winning this award Adiga has shown his extreme virtuosity as a writer. He is the fourth writer born in India to claim the Man Booker Prize. This paper discusses Postcolonial India in Adiga’s *The White Tiger*. Some recent novelists like Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Githa Hariharan and Amitav Ghosh have been highlighting the postcolonial issues in their works in unique ways. Thus, issues like people’s ignorance, illiteracy, starvation, poverty, suffering and humiliation got expressed in contemporary Indian writings in English. Balram Halwai the protagonist of the novel *The White Tiger*. The story is told in flashbacks, in the mode of letters written by Balram to Wen Jiabo, the Chinese Premier. When the story begins, Balram enjoys a high position in society. He is getting all the facilities from all levels because now he is in “Light”, but he was born and raised in “Darkness”. So he explained to Wen Jiabo, “Please understand, your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of light and an India of darkness” (TWT 14). The protagonist intends to give the premier an idea of “real” India beforehand, through the details of his own life story.

The term “post colonialism” refers to the ways in which the race, ethnicity, culture and human identity are represented in the modern era, after many colonized countries achieved independence. Post colonial critics are concerned with literature produced by colonial powers and works produced by those who are colonized. Postcolonial theory looks at issues of power, economics, politics, religion and culture and how these elements work in relation to colonial hegemony. The beginning of Postcolonial study can be traced with the publication of Frantz Fanon’s French book *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961, in which Frantz argued that if colonized people want to ascertain their identity they have to dig their past. *The White Tiger* by Adiga is a powerful narrative that delves into the intricate layers of Indian society, focusing on themes of caste, class, and power. Balram’s narrative provides insight into the realities of life in India, where societal structures and norms dictate one’s destiny. Born into the “Darkness” of rural poverty, Balram is forced to work as a servant for a wealthy family in Delhi, known as the Stork. “Sir, I am from Laxmangarh. My father was a rickshaw-puller. I want to work as your driver. I’m a good driver, sir,” I said. ‘I don’t drink, I don’t steal. And you won’t have to pay me much sir” (TWT 65). As Balram becomes acquainted with the lifestyle of the rich, he becomes increasingly disillusioned with the oppressive caste system and the corrupt practices that govern society. He witnesses the exploitation of the poor by the rich and the impurity with which the upper classes wield their power. Driven by ambition and a desire for freedom, Balram decides to break free from his servitude. He cunningly orchestrates the murder of his employer, the Stork, and flees with a large sum of money. With his newfound wealth, Balram establishes his own business empire, rising to the top of Indian society. Throughout the novel, Adiga masterfully explores the complexities of identity, morality, and social hierarchy in contemporary India. The character of Balram serves as a symbol of defiance against the oppressive forces of caste and class, challenging readers to question the status and consider the possibility of change. India is one of the countries with the highest population where most of them are poor as well as illiterate. To find a so-called “acceptable job” and for most of the time an unacceptable one means a matter of life and death for the majority of Indians, just like the recruitment in construction or digging jobs that Balram described; “Every now and then a truck comes by, and all the men in the field rush to it with their hands outstretched, shouting, ‘Take me! Take me!’” (TWT 32).

Despite it is a low salary, Balram has to send all of it to his family, adding to that, servants had to smooth the atmosphere of their masters. Poverty and misery oblige the protagonist every time

to cope with the hard conditions. Whenever a low class member obtains a work, they compete with one another to ensure they remain the longest time. Their daily misery compels them to cling with their claws, every time there is a source of money, even if it is risky; Balram's family sends him the little nephew Dharam, he said: "They sent me here. I took the bus and train and asked people and came here" (TWT 157). All these facts lead the poor layer to be aggressive and to commit violent acts. The national bourgeoisie divided India into two parts: India of Light, versus India of Darkness. This division that Fanon named "the Manichaeic world" illustrates the brutal manipulation adopted by the colonizers which makes the colonized nature of existence unclear (6). Ashok's brother, the Mongoose, shouted at Balram's face saying "Don't pull the chain [of the dog] so hard! They're worth more than you are!" (TWT 47), statements like this minimize the servant's value and lead him to question his existence; "who am I in reality?". The French psychiatrist Franz Fanon explains "the abnormal relation between the two that links human with animal or object part of nature" (182). Before murdering his master, Balram manifests some violent behaviors that are, according to Fanon, "the signs of a long buried hatred and oppression against their dictators" (8). As the protagonist belongs to a detached social ladder, alone, he is incapable of abolishing the social division, he starts, like many other oppressed servants, to express his rage and refusal to the rich class rules through exercising physical violence with someone of his size. The bourgeois people of this novel turn to bribery to resolve their problems and to violence whenever their rules are contradicted; they not only torture and kill their opponents, but they radically erase their family, including their houses. Ashok's family is no exception, but Balram chooses violence to liberate himself and become a man, he confesses "All I wanted was the chance to be a man—and for that, one murder was enough" (TWT 192). Fanon argued concerning this point that "At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them and restores their self-confidence" (249), Balram's master is spineless with no authority over his family.

Nor his acquaintances or even his servant. The way he behaves with Balram helped this latter gradually getting closer to him and slaughtering him in the end. By killing his master, he changed the roles of both master and servant. His hatred and disgust for the upper class and for his family makes him regretless; he claims, "The real nightmare you get is... that you're still in Delhi, still the servant of another man, and then you wake up. The sweating stops. The heartbeat slows. You did it! You killed him!" (189). Balram's journey allowed him to develop a stronger personality and become a better master to his drivers. He states:

I don't treat them like servants—I don't slap, or bully, or mock anyone. I don't insult any of them by calling them my "family," either. They're my employees, I'm their boss, that's all. I make them sign a contract and I sign it too, and both of us must honor that contract. That's all. If they notice the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I keep things clean, they'll go up in life. If they don't, they'll be drivers all their lives. I leave the choice up to them. When the work is done I kick them out of the office: no chitchat, no cups of coffee. A White Tiger keeps no friends. It's too dangerous. (182)

Balram's act of violence is not just a personal rebellion against Ashok, but a symbolic rejection of the entire system that has oppressed him. It is a way for him to assert his identity and claim his freedom in a world that has denied him both. His rise to power, however, is deeply ambivalent. Balram achieves success and autonomy, but he also loses a part of his humanity in the process. This ambivalence is central to the postcolonial condition; even as Balram seeks to liberate himself from the legacies of colonialism, he is trapped in a cycle of violence and exploitation that mirrors the colonial past.

Adiga shows how unemployment forces people from villages and small towns to migrate to big cities in search of jobs and better opportunities. They find menial jobs with the rich where they are

exploited and ill-treated by their masters. Balram describes the miserable condition of the people returning from the cities, “A month before the rains, the men came back from Dhanbad and Delhi and Calcutta, leaner, darker, angrier, but with money in their pockets” (26). Balram is forced by his circumstances to leave his education and start looking for a job to support his family. Belonging to the Halwai caste, he faces abuse and discrimination on various occasions. In India, a person’s caste and religion play a major role in determining his...

Social position and those belonging to the lower castes are looked down upon. Balram is inquired about his caste whenever he applies for a job. When he asks a taxi driver for driving lessons he says, “That’s what you people do. You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?” (56). Working as a chauffeur for the Stork, Balram is subjected to repeated humiliation and beatings not just by the master but also his sons. He is often asked to do odd and sundry jobs like walking the dog, cleaning the courtyard, etc. Giving expression to the injustice he faces, Balram says, “The Stork had a special use for driver two. I had to heat water on the stove, carry it to the courtyard, and then lift the old man’s feet up one after another and immerse them in the hot water and then massage them both gently. After half an hour he would say, ‘the water’s gone cold’” (70).

According to Balram, it is the institution of the family that traps a man in this rooster coop and prevents him from breaking free. He feels that only a person who is not afraid to lose his family and can see them being hunted and killed can break free from the oppressive rule of the powerful. He also states that it was not for everyone, “That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature” (176).

Balram understands how the poor have been conditioned in subjugation and accept their pathetic circumstances and hardly ever try to unite and fight for a better life. He satirically remarks, “A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent— 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 hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse” (176).

The crux of the novel lies in the rooster coop analogy; the oppressed are kept in servitude with the fear of violence, which leads to psychological trauma among the oppressed. Despite being born with the same potential, they are trained to think of themselves as inferior and fall victim to unjust hierarchy. When Pinky Madam is involved in a driving accident, Balram is asked by his master to take the blame on himself. The rich master uses his power and superior position to manipulate Balram to take the blame for the accident in order to save Pinky Madam from conviction and also to save their dignity and status. Balram, a driver, is treated as a dispensable pawn for their personal gain. After being abused and suffering for years in servitude of the rich and influential, Balram holds a deep grudge and anger towards high-class society and in an outburst of anger kills his master Ashok and steals his money. His pent-up rage and frustration lead him to resort to violence when he brutally kills Ashok with a bottle and steals his money that he uses to build a life for himself. He uses the stolen money to start a taxi service and becomes a successful entrepreneur.

By killing Ashok, Balram achieves material success but he remains haunted by the past. His narrative voice is tinged with guilt and self-loathing, as he reflects on the violence and deception that enabled his rise. This psychological burden can be understood as a form of postcolonial trauma, where the scars of colonialism continue to shape the individual’s psyche long after the end of formal colonial rule. Balram’s fractured identity, his feelings of inferiority, and his moral compromises all point to the deep psychological wounds left by colonialism. These wounds are not just personal, but collective, as they reflect the broader trauma experienced by postcolonial societies in their struggle for identity and autonomy.

This paper concludes that through the lens of postcolonial trauma theory, we can see how Balram’s journey reflects the psychological and societal scars left by colonialism. Balram’s

struggle for freedom, his fragmented identity, and his ultimate act of rebellion are all shaped by the lingering effects of colonial rule, which continue to define the socio-economic and psychological landscape of modern India.

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