

International Multidisciplinary
Research Journal

Golden Research
Thoughts

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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2231-5063

Golden Research Thoughts Journal is a multidisciplinary research journal, published monthly in English, Hindi & Marathi Language. All research papers submitted to the journal will be double - blind peer reviewed referred by members of the editorial board. Readers will include investigator in universities, research institutes government and industry with research interest in the general subjects.

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SUBALTERN SPEAKS IN ARVIND ADIGA'S, "THE WHITE TIGER"



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ABSTRACT:

'The First Night', 'The Second Night', so on and so forth are the chapters of Arvind Adiga's, "The White Tiger". It is reminiscent of "One Thousand and One Nights" or the "Arabian Nights". In the "One Thousand and One Nights" too like in Adiga's "The White Tiger" a subaltern grabs an opportunity and begins to speak. Scheherazade too would have been a voiceless victim of King Shahryar's tyranny had she not begun to speak. Similarly in "The White Tiger", Munna alias Balram Halwai uses the pretext of the Chinese Premier's arrival in 'Bangalore' and writes letters to him for seven consecutive nights, elucidating the workings of the real India. He believes that the Chinese Premier like any other dignitary will be met with 'namastes' by Indian ministers, told about the moral and traditional nature of India and finally

the grand success story of the nation as a 'vibrant' democracy shall be eulogised. Munna believes none of this is true and wishes to introduce the Chinese Premier to the different India's that lie within the subaltern history or "history told from below" (Gramsci 233).

KEYWORDS

"The White Tiger", democracy, academics engagement, hegemonic domination..

INTRODUCTION

Now two problems arise out of this. As Gayatri Spivak points out,

"Subaltern is not a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] other, for somebody who's is not getting a piece of the pie... everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern." (Spivak in Kumar 3).

So is Munna aka Balram Halwai merely oppressed or subaltern? Moreover, along with Gloria Jean Wilkins or bell hooks, Spivak questions the academics engagement with the other. She stresses that to truly engage with the subaltern, the academic would have to remove himself or herself as 'the expert' at the center of the 'Us and Them' binary social relation. Not only should the academic want to know the subaltern's experiences but should also want to know the subaltern's explanation of his or her experiences of hegemonic domination.

This brings us to our second problem. Has Arvind Adiga been able to extricate himself and give the subaltern a chance to speak his heart out? Answering the second question first, Pankaj Mishra says that, "The White Tiger evokes with startling accuracy and tenderness, the... desperate struggles of the deprived." (Mishra in Adiga- inside front cover). So to a greater extent Arvind Adiga's triumph in "The White Tiger" is due to his Keatsian "negative capability" (Keats in Li ix) or Eliotish "objective correlative" (Eliot 4) which makes it seem more of Munna's story or Balram Halwai's or the White Tiger's or Ashok Sharma's but not Arvind Adiga's.

The only question which remains to prove beyond any doubt is whether Balram Halwai is a voiceless subaltern. To look into the matter, one needs to scrutinise the different Indias that Munna experiences at close quarters. Munna mentions that there are two Indias; the Light and the Darkness. Between these, the Light is the land along the seas and oceans whereas the Darkness presides over the riverbanks. It sucks in everything with which it comes in contact. These two specific regions can be further subdivided into Laxmangarh, Dhanbad, Delhi and Bangalore (that's what Adiga calls Bengaluru). It all begins in Laxmangarh a village in the district of Gaya, i.e. ironically Bodh Gaya the place where Buddha had received enlightenment. Unfortunately the feudal set up still exists here. Four landlords living in mansions own both land and water entirely. They are called the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar and the Raven. The place is like medieval Europe where only those "To the Manor Born" (Spence 1) ruled and all else were serfs. Even the God worshipped here is Hanuman, teaching the populace to be loyal and devoted to their masters. This too is almost a reflection of medieval Europe where the clergy and the Feudal Lord were hand-in-glove with each other. The clergy would exploit the ambiguity of language by asking all the faithful to "serve the LORD" (King 23:25); where Lord could be either God or the Feudal Lord. So fatalism breeds here and is internalized.

In Laxmangarh, the situation is so intolerable for the masses that rapes are common and so is sodomy:

"The Raven owned the worst land, which was the dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze with their folks. If they didn't have their money he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him the Raven." (Adiga 25).

Sodomy is so casually referred here like in Dr. Anand Yadav's, "Natrang". Having been born in such a place, Munna meaning simply boy, is given his name, 'Balram' by the village schoolteacher. Firstly the schoolteacher thinks of the name Ram but there was already a Ram in class, so Munna is called Balram, just to avoid any confusion. Moreover, the teacher's name is Krishna and Balram is Krishna's sidekick. As if this isn't enough, Munna doesn't even know his age, for no one has bothered to tell him. Once when his cousin sister got married, they had to take a loan for her dowry from the village landlord, 'the Stork'. To repay it, Munna too has to contribute. He has to leave school and start working at the local

teashop. Later in an election year, the tea-shop owner took Munna to the school and got a Leaving Certificate made for him. In this Certificate, Munna's birthdate is mentioned as one which makes his present age 18. Then the tea-shop owner sold Munna's vote to the ruling politician, 'The Great Socialist' who lords over even the landlords. Through all this, Adiga successfully shows how identity is not a matter of choice for the subaltern. It is forced upon him at all junctures. Such a person's life is an existentialist curse of Sisyphus, doomed from the start.

Earlier, Munna's schooling had taken place under a teacher who had not received his salary for six months. So the school teacher had embezzled the student midday lunch money. Munna says in this connection that,

"No one blamed the school teacher for doing this. You can't expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet. Everyone in the village knew that he would have done the same in his position. Some were even proud of him, for having got away with it so cleanly." (Adiga 33).

If education is in shambles so is public transport. The only state transport bus connecting the village to the nearby small town is 'never late by more than an hour or two'. Under such circumstances, Munna's father Vikram Halwai becomes the ultimate subaltern. Being principled, he doesn't want to bow down in front of anyone. So the only job left for him is to become a 'rikshaw-puller'. Fulfilling the demands of the house, this simple man gets affected by tuberculosis;

"The story of a poor man's life is written on his body in a sharp pen." (Adiga 27).

Where corruption is a way of life, it goes without saying that Vikram Halwai does not receive any medical attention from any doctor at the government hospital across the river. Munna uses the ultimate Euphemism when he says that,

"...my father was permanently cured of his tuberculosis." (Adiga 50).

After his father's death, his elder brother Kishan immediately takes up the same role. Poverty perpetuates itself in a vicious circle. This is universally true of all subalterns. In the Iranian, Nasira Sharma's story, "Hunger" too the same principle can be observed. This would have been true for Munna too. From a human-spider under the tables of a tea-shop in Laxmangarh to the tea-shop in Dhanbad and from a driver in Dhanbad to a driver in Delhi, his life too would have remained in a rooster coop as Spivak's 'voiceless subaltern'.

Adiga does not stop here, nor does Munna. Following the principle laid out by Homi K. Bhabha, who takes Spivak's argument further, this subaltern is in a position to subvert the authority of the social groups who hold hegemonic power. Unlike Kishan, Munna aka Balram has come to know that in the new India;

"It didn't matter whether you were a woman, or a Muslim, or an untouchable: anyone with a belly could rise up." (Adiga 64).

And Balram has a big belly,. His granny Kusum calls him a "greedy pig" but he is greedy for knowledge. Having hardly received any education, he gains knowledge by eavesdropping on others, especially on his employers Ashok and Pinky Madam. When he feels that he has known enough about the new India to take the final plunge, he kills his employer Ashok and runs away with his bag of cash. Balram calls it 'an act of entrepreneurship'. This is totally different from other violent acts of resistance by subalterns in Indian Literature. For e.g. in "Paraja" by Gopinath Mohanty, Sukru Jani finally hacks the oppressive moneylender but for him it is an 'act of catharsis'. Whereas, Balram's act is one more step in the direction of fulfilling his grand plan for becoming a successful entrepreneur.

Balram goes to Bangalore, uses all the corrupt practices he has learnt in Delhi and establishes almost a monopoly for his, 'whitetiger-tecnologydrivers.com'. The entire novel is narrated by him as a subaltern history of India or Gramscian, "history told from below" (Gramsci 233). He proved that today's India has flexible morals and values, uses tradition only when it promises personal profit and instead of being a socialist democracy seems more like a highly competitive jungle where the only policy that exists is, 'eat or be eaten'.

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