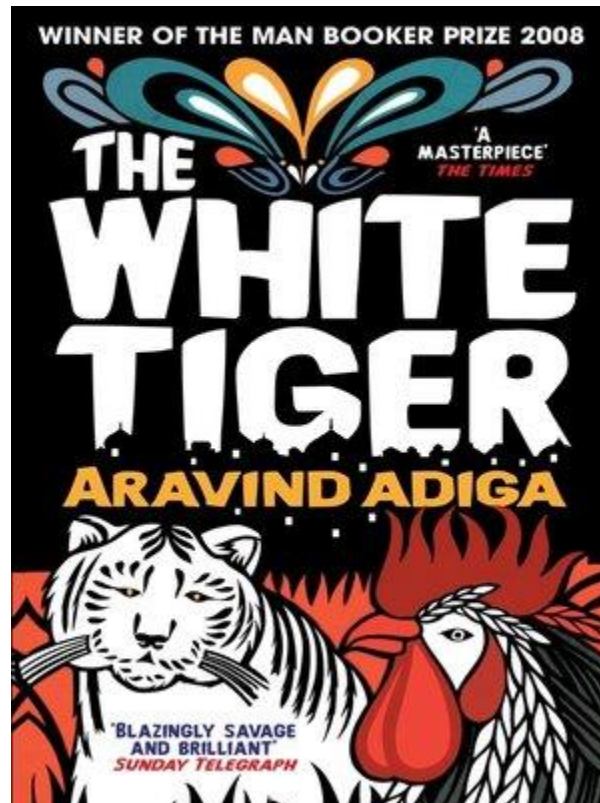


The Protagonist Balrama, a Subaltern in Aravind Adiga's Novel *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the dominance of upper class over the marginalized, the illiterates and their emergence from the bondage of the power structure also dealing with their exploitation during the liberation in Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger*. With the help of Antonio Gramsci's theory on subaltern consciousness, the paper also focuses on Balram, the protagonist of the study as a subaltern who continues to accept the ill treatment of the upper-class dominants. He is confronted with issues that triggered his subaltern consciousness, the pressure which pulled him

out of the bourgeoisies' confinement brings forth his implicit consciousness that was within him which was kept in control by the ideology internalized within the minds of those who have been subjugated under the hegemonic domination.

Introduction

The meaning of the term 'subaltern' can be traced back to the writings of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist who first introduced the term in his work called cultural hegemony. Since then the term is associated with many connotations. The concept of subalternism starts with the treatment of the Europeans over the non-European nations. In post-colonial theory, subaltern is anyone who is labeled as an inferior and uncivilized by the west. But in the twenty first century, the writings of authors such as Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Spivak, Ranajith Guha, E.P. Thompson and various others brought this concept of subalternity to the forum and enlarged the perspective of how one views it. Now the term comes to mean those who have not been given space to articulate their voice or express their feelings or opinions as well as people who have been easily influenced and manipulated without their knowledge and consent especially in terms of cultural domination.

India was under the control of the Europeans until 1947, which got India freedom from the Britishers and it was independence for all the citizens of India. But the ground reality was entirely different. The poor and lower-class citizens who were at the margins of society did not gain freedom from the upper classes who continued to dominate them by making the lower classes believe that their rule is legitimate. Though they achieved freedom from the Britishers, they lost their freedom to the upper-class citizens with whom the power rested and mechanism of control. Through literature, they are trying to get back their freedom, their voice and all that was lost to them. Subaltern literatures give a detailed picture of the upper-class discrimination through class and caste and how they are always subjugated by them with no voice to speak for themselves.

The White Tiger

In the novel *The White Tiger*, the protagonist Balram is seen as a subaltern and emerges

as a representative of all those people who have been subjugated around the world under the hegemonic domination and the way they unwillingly abide themselves to their consent thereby secretly fantasizing freedom from this age-old bondage. While many people whirl in the murky pit of this cultural system built by the hegemonic rulers, few of them try to break free from it sacrificing their precious life in the process. It is only during this process of striving to attain freedom, Gramsci's said that consciousness is made to be visible. Gramsci brings out his theory of subaltern consciousness by stating that the capitalist states use cultural institutions as weapons to dominate and exert control over others to maintain its power in the society. Being a Marxist, he replaces economic determinism with cultural determinism where culture determines everything and acts as a base from which the superstructure such as caste, class and religious divisions arises. Thus, it is understood that the capitalist-maintained control not just through violence, political and economic coercion, but through cultural ideology. In this process of creating ideology, the bourgeoisie developed a hegemonic culture, which propagated its own values and norms so that they became the common values for all. As a result, the people of working class identify themselves with that of the bourgeoisie and helped to maintain the status quo of the dominant class rather than revolting against them. In other words, the term cultural hegemony refers to the ability of a group of people to hold power over social institutions, and thus, to strongly influence the everyday thoughts, expectations, and behavior of the rest of society by directing the normative ideas, values, and beliefs that become the dominant worldview of a society. Thus, Cultural hegemony functions by achieving the consent of the masses to abide social norms and the rules of law by framing the worldview of the ruling class, and the social and economic structures that go with it, as just, legitimate, and designed for the benefit of all, even though they may really only benefit the ruling class.

Gramsci further defines the implicit and explicit consciousness that results in the opposition to common sense. Implicit consciousness as an activity which lies inherent and invisible in all those who are subjugated by the dominants as they are not will fully obliging or yielding to the norms and values of the dominants. Explicit is verbal which he has inherited from the past and uncritically observes as he is forced to confirm himself to the societal ideas and beliefs. Gramsci states the evolution of the two contradictory consciousnesses is the reflection of

the contradiction between opposing social groups.

Gramsci's implicit and explicit consciousness can be determined easily based on the way the subaltern reacts to the treatment in the hands of the ruling class.

Protagonist Balram

In the novel *The White Tiger*, the protagonist Balram is seen as a subaltern due to the ill treatments he receives from the upper-class masters he worked under. He falls victim to the cultural institutions in terms of class, caste and religion thereby exhibiting his explicit consciousness as he continued to take the oppression until his time of liberation breaks in revealing his implicit consciousness.

Firstly, Balram falls victim to the hierarchical system of class which brings disintegration in the nation as a whole. Class is usually predicted upon one's caste. There are three main classes—upper classes, middle class or working class and lower class. Accordingly, the higher classes correspond with the higher castes and generally have access to better and more numerous options than the other classes. The upper class is the social class composed of the wealthiest members of the society who wield greatest political power. Accordingly, the upper class is generally distinguished by immense wealth which is passed on from one generation to other. In many countries, the term upper class is associated with hereditary land ownership. This suggests that land means wealth and power.

With the help of these two in hand, they were able to satisfy their wants and fulfill their wishes. When their voices rose above the voices of the poor, ultimately the voices of the poor went unheard. It is in this process marginalization begins towards the working-class and lower-class people. Even in the novel, the protagonist Balram hails from a village called Laxmangarh, a place that lives in absolute Darkness, and a place dominated and controlled by the superior class landlords where the productivity of the poor and fertility of the land are forcibly taken away from them by the landlords. Balram shows how these landlords feed themselves on these poor people by demanding one third of the people's production.

Thus, it is shown in the novel that the entire village is deprived of good health, employment, freedom and became a place of poverty-ridden society. Not only this, before Balram could complete his schooling, he is forcibly stopped from pursuing his education as his family had taken a huge sum of money from one of the landlords as debts to get their cousin married away and it is to clear those debts he becomes a school ‘dropout.’ Thus, Balram becomes furious on the upper-class elites who thus have denied him the right to have education as the same people have mocked at him for being an illiterate. If he had given an opportunity to pursue his education to accomplish the wishes his father had for him, the plot line would have been different and he would not have become the murderer of what he appears to be at the end of the novel.

Hence it is understood that neither Balram nor any of the villagers in Laxmangarh could question these upper-class elites who wields power over the entire village and thereby exploiting the lives of everyone residing in that village.

Thus Balram is pushed to such an extent where he had to leave his school to work in a tea stall to do all the menial jobs. Balram is praised by the school inspector who named him as ‘The White Tiger’ for his intelligence but he could not strive after his goals due to the capitalistic dominance and finds himself in an awful situation when he is unemployed. The trauma of not being able to reach his goals makes Balram a serious subaltern since he has not been given space to pursue his education nor to articulate his voice. The pathetic condition of illiterate Balram is continued even when he is employed in the Stork’s house as a driver.

Linguistic Hegemony

Linguistic hegemony, has been used to make Balram a victim and a tool to oppress him. He is looked down and mocked by the master and his wife just because he does not know the English language. Since he is a school dropout, Balram did not get the opportunity to complete his schooling and he remembers little of what he had acquired in his school. When he fails to give the right answers to the questions put forth by his master, he is cornered as half-baked citizen of India by the same people who denied him the means of education. In another

circumstance, Balram is made a laughing stock of the master and his wife Pinky Madam and is humiliated for mispronouncing words. This ill treatment sparks his subaltern consciousness and thus in the beginning of the novel it is shown as Balram showing excessive obsession towards English language and aspires to learn the language by eavesdropping, reading roadside pamphlets and books at a cheap cost.

Religion

Religion is another institution that acts a weapon in the hands of the upper classes and it is no different than the hierarchical system of caste and class. Though India is claimed to be a nation of diversity rich in heritage and culture, there are three major religious sections that dominate above all. They are Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Since most of the Hindus belong to the privileged class, the oppression is more on part of the lower-class people.

Another instance in the novel is that when Balram is employed in the landlord's house as a driver, he learns that the co-driver who is a Muslim claimed to be a Hindu because of dire need to feed his starving family knowing full well the landlord Stork is a religious fanatic employs those who are Hindus and rejects people who do not belong to his religion which pulled him to such an extent of hiding his religious identification as a Muslim because he very well knew that he would not be provided a job if his identity as Muslim, revealed.

Here again fanaticism drives this driver to such extent he had to disguise his identity to pretend all his life. If the landlord finds out this secret, either he would have lost his job or he would have been punished for cheating them this far. Hence, he leaves the place without informing anyone. But Balram manages to escape these religious traps only to fall prey to caste and class system. Since he is a Hindu, he manages to acquire a job in the landlord's house; else his life would have been worse.

Explication of Ideologies

The issue of Subaltern could evidently be understood by an explication of the prevailing ideologies in Indian society because the essence of India lies in the 'caste system' that governs

the citizens all their life. It has provided India with a very simple maxim that wherever one lives in India, he will be surrounded by the world of caste, whether he is a Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian or any tribal group.

In the novel *The White Tiger* too, the world of Darkness has rigid caste distinction, superstitions, caste and culture conflict. Man is known and recognized by his caste. When Balram is interested to learn driving, there again he is confronted with the evils of caste system to define his identity in the society. Balram is faced to answer caste related questions to prove his identity in order to learn driving to survive in the society. The old driver who teaches driving denies teaching Balram driving because of his prejudiced nature that driving could be learnt by people who belong to the caste of warriors and thus he enquires Balram's caste to teach him driving. It is very clear that even to learn something to reach one's goals in life, caste plays an important role and here Balram too suffers the same problem as he is denied to be taught to drive as he comes from the caste of Halwai meaning sweet makers.

Though the issues related with caste and religion triggers his consciousness, it is after moving into the city (Delhi), Balram is confronted with many issues that strikes his subaltern consciousness in varying degrees. In the beginning he accepts his role as a driver but coming in contact with his master Ashok's family, Balram's consciousness varies and he strives after a life that is free from poverty, bondage, exploitation etc. Therefore he dreams of becoming a successful entrepreneur in the near future. The treatment he gets in his masters house challenges his consciousness as a subaltern and triggers him to break free from the shackles of age old slavery under the dominance of the upper-class elites.

Gramsci's implicit and explicit consciousness is more visible in the class divisions. The rich people are influential and powerful enough to escape punishments for their criminal deeds readily through the power of their position and money. On the other hand, the poor get for any crime, be it very minor or major whether they have done it or not. In the novel, when Balram is pressurized to surrender for a crime which he had never committed, it is at this peak his implicit consciousness is shown in the highest degree. Though the accident took place due to the

negligence of Pinki madam, who was driving the car at that time still Balram was framed for it. He had no option but to take the blame on him because he was a poor man whose value of life and reputation has no existence in front of his masters.

Thus, it is very clear Balram has been victimized by the cultural institutions such as class, caste, and religion which obscured his equality and his place in the society thereby making him to confirm himself to the societal norms and structures (common sense) at the cost of sacrificing his freedom, privacy and independence. Throughout the novel, Balram is forced, coerced to accept his role as a driver and made to believe it is his duty to serve the masters with complete faith and devotion. He is made to be convinced of the situation taking place in his society due to his low caste and that he should adjust with it as long as there is food for his stomach. This helps to understand that Balram's explicit consciousness had been on work so far as he simply observes the societal norms borrowed from his generations. He had been coerced to follow and give in to the demands made by the upper-class bourgeoisies rather than to revolt. But the moment Balram realised when his life felt nothing in the eyes of the landlords who asked him to take the blame of killing a child when he had not committed it. It is during this point in his life, he realizes the sly and cunning nature of his masters and understands their humiliation and ill-treatment starts to rebel against their cultural hegemony by breaking free from their shackles. It is at this point he plans to kill his master and to steal his money to lead a life his master had been living so far. Here Balram's implicit consciousness is revealed as he contradicts with what the society orders him to do. The reason is that he has acknowledged he suffered enough and that it is high time he breaks free from the rooster coop before he is slaughtered by the elites. His implicit consciousness is revealed in the activities he does to satisfy the wants he has been longing as well as to equate himself with the upper-class landlords to prove them he is no less to them in anyway. He drinks high quality of liquor, wears good clothes and visits to mall to see the world of 'light', and collects money by cheating his master just to experience the enjoyment and satisfaction one can get by sleeping with high profile prostitutes.

To Conclude

Thus, the novel, focussing on Balram Halwai, a son of a rickshaw puller, destined to

make sweets becomes Ashok Sharma who is the son of a wealthy landlord. His transformation from Munna, Balram Halwai, White Tiger, to Ashok Sharma is the sketch for rising from underclass.

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