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**The Voice of Servility and Dominance Expressed through  
Animal Imagery in Adiga's *The White Tiger***

**M. Poonkodi, Ph.D.**

# The Voice of Servility and Dominance Expressed through Animal Imagery in Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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... people are animals.

-Nietzsche

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate how Aravind Adiga has used animal imagery in his award winning novel *The White Tiger* and determine how this narrative device is effectively linked to its title and the theme.

The symbols of animals are normally related to three main ideas: “a mode of transportation, as an object of sacrifice, and as an inferior form of life.” Aravind Adiga’s use of animal imagery depicts the dominant but negative qualities of Indian Masters and servile instincts of the servant class.

Close reading has been given to the novel to trace the course of the Protagonist, Balram’s journey from jungle like village to city and record the resentful voice of his aspirations and frustrations with special focus on animal imagery and its relevance.

Balram represents the servant class that has been trained to exist in perpetual servitude and unwilling to rise against the masters, powerful and strong in terms of class, community and status. Much of the discussion in the analysis has been my own interpretation combined with those made by others about this novel or any other novel bearing semblance in its tone and tenor.

## Introduction



Aravind Adiga's maiden novel that won him the Bookers Prize bears a symbolic title *The White Tiger*. The novel is a satire on the contemporary Indian milieu, proud of its long-lasting democratic status and ongoing political strategies that seem to confer judicious grades of equality to Indian populace.

It is amusing to note that Indian English novels, written by both men and women, irrespective of their gender differences, bear a common theme of conflict or war between two groups – one having a superior identity as a master coercing the other to fall in line with his/her self-conceited ideological preferences, vile and gaiety.

Aravind Adiga is no exception. He lavishly uses a distinctive narrative technique that complements his theme delivered through scattered imagery, especially selected from animal kingdom. The use of animal imagery with an "Orwellian insight"<sup>1</sup> partially minimizes his imagination. Yet he finds it a convenient tool to discover the peculiarities in human behaviour and "attack poverty and disparity without being sentimental or condescending"<sup>2</sup>

### **Inherent Nature of Indians to Employ Imagery**

All over the world, writers with concern towards humanity get agitated when they witness horrors and horrendous conditions, thwarting men's dreams and enterprises. They express their empathy in their theme, using rich animal imageries. Indians, in particular are accustomed to the art of employing imagery in their conversational deliverance or philosophical deliberations: "talking metaphorically or obliquely by implication is generally natural with Indian.

In everyday language they often use imagery as a means of expressing, reinforcement, illustration, evocation and also as objective correlative.”<sup>3</sup> Aravind, due to his “inherent Indianness,”<sup>4</sup> uses excessive animal imagery with literal, metaphorical and allegorical meanings. His novel is populated with buffaloes, pigs, roosters and other species of fowl and fauna.

### **The Journey of *The White Tiger* from a jungle-like village into a Coop-like City**

The central image of the novel is *White Tiger* that expresses the character of the protagonist, Balram, who believes that he is different and a “genetic anomaly”<sup>5</sup> like the white tiger. Aravind Adiga allows Balram to embark on an enduring journey from a jungle-like village of darkness into a coop-like city of light, and shatters the deftly fabricated image of India, making conspicuous of a hypocritical and a haphazard nation, established on a new class system of discrimination: “In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India,” (64) says Balram. “These days there are two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.” (64)

Balram commences his safari from Lakshmanagarh, the land of darkness where he was born. The readers who participate in the protagonist’s expedition in the land of ‘darkness’ have virtual perception of the “gulf” Adiga has been referring to in an interview: “I wanted something that would provoke and annoy people. I was trying to capture this gulf in the country.”<sup>6</sup>



It has become a common phenomenon among the Indian writers to describe the “gulf” as the land of darkness, filthy and famish stricken, ever invoking a nauseating sensation to the urbanites.

We find that Adiga is triumphant, annoying the urbanized readers. At the same time, he makes them aware of the hardship that people in village would face with nix luxury and comfort, the privileges exclusively relished by the literate and affluent city bred people.

## **Animal and Bird Imagery in the Land of Darkness**

Adiga gives a picturesque but an ironic description of the village, ‘a typical Indian village paradise’ (20) with loitering pigs, feathered roosters and buffaloes:

Down the middle of the road, families of pigs are sniffing through the sewage-  
....Vivid red and brown flashes of feather- roosters fly up and down the roofs of  
houses. Past the hogs and roosters, you’ll get to my house-... At the doorway to  
my house you’ll see the most important member of my family.

The water buffalo.

She was the fattest thing in our family.... She was the dictator of our house! (20)

The villagers in Balram’s place live in a world that has no value and no luxuries. Their relationship with animals is so strange. They obstinately dehumanize themselves and elevate the status of animals.

## **References to Animals: Domestic and Wild**



A description of the Buffalo as ‘the fattest thing’ indirectly tells us that all the members of his family are gaunt and emaciated due to paucity of nourishing food. Simultaneously, it also produces endearing humour when the buffalo is allegorically labelled as a ‘dictator’ demanding special service and care from them for it being their only source of income.

The literal references to animals are followed with their metaphorical companions in the form of human beings - the dictators of the peasants. Adiga finds that the “evil impulses or passion.”<sup>7</sup> of humanity could be briefly but effectively described in an Orwellian manner by associating their behaviour with that of the animals’ and birds’ - wild and timid.

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The Voice of Servility and Dominance Expressed through Animal Imagery in Adiga’s  
*The White Tiger*

The landlords of Indian villages have abundant wealth by birth. Yet they are avaricious, and their joy, according to Adiga, is in acquisition of land from the illiterate peasants who, for want of money, would pledge or sell theirs for lower prizes. If a village happens to be gifted with a river flow and teeming fish, the large portion of fish catch would go to them and the poor fisher would suffer with small amounts of wages paid in return. Women are not spared despite their vulnerability. They are sexually abused by them.

Adiga comfortably demonstrates these common but perverse characteristics of landlords in contemporary India, using precise context and restricted vocabulary. He parallels them with specific animals and reduces the task of describing their wickedness in detail. The landlords who Balram sees alighting from an ambassador, bear no names but are metaphorically rebuked as 'The Buffalo', 'the Wild Boar', 'the Stork' and 'the Raven'. Cumulatively, their images suggest "the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him (them)." (24):

The Buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, and each got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him.

The stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, .He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river....

His brother was called the Wild Boar. He owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work in those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his daily wages.....

The Raven owned the worst land, which was dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze with their flocks. If they didn't have their money, he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him the Raven. (24)

### **Other Writers of Indian Writing in English on the Problems of Peasants and Farmers**

The problems of peasants and farmers have not been a new subject for Indian readers. Even women writers have dealt with those topics in detail. Kamala Markandeya is one such writer with profuse social concern. The titles of her novels such as *Rice and Monsoon* and *Handful of Rice* show her knowledge about agriculture and Indian farmers. In *The Nectar in a Sieve*, she portrays how the farmers toil in the hot sun and harvest rice while the most profited are the landlords and the financiers. The farmers do not get their share of rice. They accept meager wages and bear cruel treatment without any resistance.

### **Adiga's Distinct Approach**

Adiga thematically bears similarities with such writers but differs from them in his narrative skill and in his profuse employment of faunal imagery that gives “zoomorphic effect”<sup>8</sup> to his novel. Balram’s comparison of rich landlords with animals and birds is stereotyped. Yet it is done in terms of concept and human functions comprising vivid expressions of the differences between the prosperous and the famished, and also between the covetous rich and the submissive poor.

The frailty, imperfection, weakness and sufferings of poor are ascribed to animal natures. Balram’s father was a rickshaw-puller – “a human beast of burden” (27) “treated like a donkey” (30), earnestly having a desire to give his son, Balram’s education. But debts compelled Balram to work at tea shop. Adiga calls those who work in tea shops as “human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still ‘boys’...” (51) He ceaselessly uses such kind of dehumanizing metaphors to bring subtle effect he intends to project; no matter whether it is their birth or death, marriage or divorce, joy or sorrow, sanitation or bawdiness, animals are inseparable in his story.

Adiga dares like Arundhati Roy in using ‘coprophagus suggestions’<sup>9</sup> in his expression of rustic environment entwined with that of the animals’: pigs “sniffing through sewage” (20), “the smell of ... pig shit” (24) blowing into tea shop, “man in a dung heap” (35) smelling not sweet, and the “goat turds.... spread like constellation of black stars” invoke an awkward sensation in the readers. But the Indian writers are unmindful of this. Amarnath Prasad, a critic of Arundhati Roy’s *God of Small Things* is right when he traces this unexceptional trait of the Indian fiction: “Coprophilia is a significant motif in modern Indian fiction in English.”<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile it cannot be denied that these authors uphold some true concern towards servant class and their welfare.

Adiga is poignant in delineating the sorry plight of the poor, less taken care of by the government and its multi-functional departments meant for public welfare. The government hospital that Balram visits at Dhanbad is not a place for poor to receive fair treatment. They are slighted and snubbed by the employees. Their state is most horrible when compared to the goats and cats that find the hospital a happy zone to live in – being fed and attended to affectionately by the hospital servants. This episode, not to miss the animals and their roles, brings out Adiga’s strong resentment towards corruption existing in government hospitals:

There were three black goats sitting on the steps to the large faded white building; the stench of goat faeces wafted from the open door. The glass in the window was broken; A cat was staring out at us from one cracked window...Kishan I carried our father in, stamping on the goat turds which had spread like a constellation of black stars on the ground. There is no doctor on the hospital. The water boy bribed him ten rupees, said that a doctor might come in the evening. The doors to the hospitals rooms were wide open; the beds had metal springs sticking out of them, and the cat begun snarling at us the moment we stepped into the room. (48)

Adiga voluntarily brings in the images of goat and cat to demean the human status in a hospital. The work class people in the government hospital refuse to provide Balram's father any medical assistance, and he dies unattended. With no sympathetic feeling for the dead, they cajole the goat feeding it with carrot: "the ward boys made us clean up after Father before we could remove the body. A goat came in and sniffed as we were mopping the blood off the floor. The ward boys petted her and fed her a plump carrot as we mopped our father's infected blood off the floor."(51)

Adiga's sardonic comparison of government servants' haughtiness with that of the 'Alsatian dogs'(150) divulge the fact that poor are always intimidated. Though possessing a mediocre job, they distance themselves from the common public and disregard their frailty. With enormous sense of disdain they harass them: "Servants need to abuse other servants. It's been bred into us, the way Alsatian dogs are bred to attack strangers."(150).

### **Rooster Coop in the Land of Light**



Adiga's obsession with animal imagery prolongs with Balram's Safari from jungle to Delhi, a city with shopping malls and IT offices. Balram is astonished to see egg shaped cars scampering with bullock carts carrying chandeliers on Delhi streets with heavy traffic. Balram realizes that the peripheral appearance of Delhi with its high economic boom and posh life style of Delhites is only an explicit layer concealing the cankers infecting the society- 'thanks to all those politicians in Delhi'(64). They are men mighty, clever and crafty who could outperform their village counterparts.

### **Village Landlords Dwarfed in City**





The four village landlords addressed as animals by Balram, strong and powerful are dwarfed and denigrated of their capacity in a big city like Delhi. They could exercise their supremacy only over Balram, their poor domestic worker. Balram is addressed as a ‘donkey’ (145) and treated as a ‘dog’ (139) by his masters and he is a ‘country- mouse’ to the other fellow drivers. He self sympathizes and questions, “why had my father.... raised me to live like an animal?”( 151). He is expected to be “loyal as a dog’ (170) wag tail merrily when courtesy is tossed and thrown at his front and take ‘the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters’. (170) In other words the servants have to bear the brunt of their masters when they commit unpardonable mistakes as they do not have alternatives.

They are confined to the ‘The Great Indian Rooster Coop’ (175). Adiga uses this domestic fowl metaphor to describe the life style of servants existing ‘in perpetual servitude; 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)

Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench- the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know 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 human beings in this country. (174)

When India attained freedom the occasion was chronologically recorded as a joyful event, invoking hopes and also illusions about the destiny of India but it was always viewed paradoxically as a sad one by some of the Indian writers. They were disillusioned with the rise of ambitious political masters from their own Indian wealthy sector. They were also disheartened when majority of Indian populace allowed themselves to remain as servant class. After all, the cages were opened to let the animals run free. But ironically, the animals stayed inside willingly only to fight with one another, letting the wild and strong to eat the meek and there evolved a new law rigid and biased as it had been earlier- “jungle law replaced Zoo law” (64).

### **Balram’s Escape from the Rooster Coop**

Though at times Balram wishes to break the coop and escape, this inherent passion to remain a servant is so strong in him that he conceals the hatred he has for his master and continues to serve him. He knows that he and his posterity have been destined to be asses and ‘carry rubble around for the rich’ (193) He convinces himself but in an apologetic tone. He knows if he dares to break, his family shall be destroyed: “only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed -- hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the Masters -- can break out of the Coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature.” (177)

At one stage Balram’s mental state of servility suddenly transforms into an aggressive mood, compelling him to perform a heinous crime. He murders his master and steals his money, and makes his way to Bangalore only to become a successful business man.

### **Escape from Both Jungle Law and Zoo Law**

Balram escapes from both the jungle law and zoo law to become an entrepreneur, “full of debauchery, depravity and wickedness” (197). This conscious act does not diminish his pride and belief of being special and unique as the white tiger. He continues to be the white tiger of Bangalore, indifferent, having no regrets for slitting the throat of his master.

In contrast, he experiences an exquisite sense of joy and freedom. He is no more confined to the rooster coop. He is no more a servant at beck and call of his master who tried to trap and send him to jail “for the killing he has not done” (177): “I’ll never say I made a mistake that night. In Delhi when I slit my master’s throat. I’ll say it was all worthwhile to know, first for a day, just for an hour, just for a *minute*, what it means not to be servant” (520-21).

In *The White Tiger* Aravind Adiga prefers using animal motifs as impressive means to delineate dehumanized genre of people, both the dominant rich and the servile deprived. His artistic interpretation deserves appreciation when he attributes animal characteristics to their cravings and exposes their follies.

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