

Recognizable Images of 'Dark India': Orientalism and Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract: Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) while exploring the poverty and hardships, inequality and caste discrimination, crime and corruption rooted in the marrow of Indian society, has reaffirmed the exoticist image of India. It makes poverty a profitable brand; and invests spirituality and mystery within the context of a prosperous journey of a lower-class to a business tycoon. The Eurocentric perspective of the conventional East is manifest in his attempt to portray an almost homogenous standard of rural Indian life. In contrast with the elitist life style of the city of Bangalore is present the superstitious illiterate villagers of the Laxmangarh which adds to the spiritual mysticism to the image of India. The recurring theme of servitude reminds us of our colonial past. The effort to treat common people as anonymous and without any individuality overtly shows the influence of the Western cosmopolitan model of writing. With the presentation of the narrator's obsession with the distinction of skin colours, the reverberation of the word 'Darkness', the depiction of the hellish and primitive almost animal-like standard of living assert that the author in his attempt to create a counter-hegemonic culture for the third world ends up in capturing the 'imaginative' or psychological 'geography' of the orientalist thought.

Keywords: Orientalism, re-Orientalism, counter-hegemonic, homogenous, social reality, Eurocentric, individuality, fetishism, collective self, stereotypes, civil-savage

Edward Said's 'Orientalism' (simply put the word suggests an academic discipline focusing on the study of oriental culture and language) centers around a Eurocentric discourse that reaffirmed the age-old notion of the orient as inferior and 'the other'. This is a non-coercive form of western colonialism based on the assumption of the preeminence of everything 'occidental'. The 'East' exists in the Western psyche as 'fascinating', 'exotic', 'mystical' and the 'seductive'. Its people, assumed as homogenous masses ('Collective Self-consistency') are defined not by conscious individuality but by 'instinctive emotions' and reactions. In Said's words Orientalism was "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient".ⁱ The well known myths about Eastern laziness, sensuality and deceit are actually the projection of the hidden desires of a Western mind, concealed under the garments of rationality. Orientalism was challenged for its generalizing and universalizing trends. However, since the 1980s Saidian ideas were supplemented by Marxist theory of 'Ideology', Derrida's 'Deconstruction' and also by 'Cultural Materialism'.

The 2009 Oscar for the film 'Slumdog Millionaire' as well as the recent advertisement for the 'incredible India', featuring the 'Mystic Maroon' (red-clad worshippers) reflect the old Western preoccupation with India: making poverty a saleable brand; and investing spirituality and mystery to add to the commercial value of India. The winning of the Booker prize by Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* has reaffirmed that exoticist image of 'Dark' India; and the book 're-orientalizes' (Lisa Lau's term, meaning 'the perpetration and development of orientalism by the orientals')ⁱⁱ the representation while deconstructing the fairy tale myth about world's spiritual capital. Its appraisal in the western reception on the one hand confirms the jargons about 'the Other' India, and consequently it raises the issue of the encounter between the Orientalized East and the so called cultural East with all its renovative forms and modes of theoretical insights.

The novel *The White Tiger* ironically explores the poverty and hardships, inequality and caste discrimination and crime and corruption, rooted somewhat exaggeratedly in the marrow of Indian society and thus debunks the myth of the idyllic India. The theme of the novel is 'entrepreneurship' (actually a sudden rise in social and economic order) in which the process itself is highlighted than the means through which it is achieved in the context of a third world country. The novel in epistolary form unfolds the prosperous journey (through crime though) from lower-class to a business tycoon of Balram Halwai through a series of letters to the Chinese Premier Wen Jibao. The central persona Balram who is penning the letters, descends from a poverty-stricken family in the northern Indian village of Laxmangarh. He thoroughly depicts his family background, his short-lived school life, his fear of the lizards, the suppression of the proletariat by the rich zaminders, his own ambitious nature, his plight for becoming a driver, social and economic relationship between the master and the servant; and all these are mired in a juxtaposition of corruption, exploitation and crime. And the narrator's (who reminds us of the unnamed narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*) presentation brilliantly touches all the issues from crime and punishment to servility and resistance. The Eurocentric perspective of the conventional East has been discussed in a range of different texts dealing with cultural analysis and the issue of identity politics. Vidhu Verma's *Non-discrimination and Equality in India: Contesting Boundaries of Social Justice* assesses the concept of social justice from the period of colonialism to the present. In *The Culturalization of Caste in India: Identity and Inequality in a Multicultural Age* by Balmurli Natarajan analyzes the survival of the caste system even in front of a dominant Western culture and thus addresses the issues of ethnicity and multiculturalism. Often prejudiced interpretations of the Eastern culture and its people are derived from the review of certain novels like Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* ('unhappy Indian families are unhappy in their own ways'); Rohinton Mistry's *Family Matters*, set in an over-crowded and politically corrupt Bombay; or Martel's *Life of Pi*, a small, slim man with an Indian complexion.ⁱⁱⁱ *The White Tiger* seems to satisfy this essentializing Western view about the 'Exotic' east. Adiga provides a near pejorative view of the

almost homogeneous standard of lowly Indian life. And thus he falls into the same old trap of Eurocentric attitude. Assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices get confirmed when the central persona attempts to describe his nation at the very beginning: "... it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy or punctuality ..." (Adiga 4); and this is precisely what reigns in the Western psyche as the economic and social reality of the East. Again sometimes later the categorization of India as 'India of Light' and 'India of Darkness' only displays the functioning of a dominative high Western culture. Deplorable and underdeveloped rural villages are equated to the 'Dark India' with its 'black river'. On the other hand, enlightened India is only the sea-side half-westernized cities boasting of technology and progress; sea ('Ocean') itself metonymically stand here as the 'well off' Western civilization.

At the outset the book is a thorough assessment of the social reality of India: a study of Contrast between India rising as a powerful global economy and the emaciating and pervasive poverty it has to face. But in doing so knowingly or unknowingly the narrator creates an aura of 'illusion' around India which in turn satisfies the concept of the fictional and imaginative India. In spite of the assertion that 'the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man' (Adiga 5) and the setting of Bangalore and Delhi with their sophisticated, elitist life style a certain sense of mystery (Mystery/Muddle in *A Passage to India*) about the enigmatic new India raises its head time and time again. There are various subtle and overt references to religion and rituals and superstitions. Indeed, religion has had a major role to play in this part of the world. But in the novel it has ended up by being a chain of superstitious customs and symbolic actions: for instance, a film begins by showing the image of Goddess Lakshmi or the magic number 786; praying to a higher power is treated in such a manner that it has fallen to a level of mere paganism and nature worship: the symbolic presence of 'the faded mural of Lord Buddha'; Balram decorating the car with 'the small statue of Goddess Lakshmi', images of mother-goddess Kali and a small fluffy ogre with a red tongue; or the comparison of Balram's speech to Mr. Ashok with that of Lord Krishna's in *The Bhagavad Gita*; the 'bored driver's Asana'; or the corrupt police officers working under the image of God and Gandhi all these are anything but normal in the Western gaze. Certain religious rituals and myths are depicted in such a way that their abnormality and 'difference' is firmly established than the belief and sincerity that run behind them. Through the past ages the river has always been the provider for the Indian civilization. The value of this mythic river has been undermined by a diametrically opposed standard of culture and hence it has been associated with flood, poisonous reptiles and the bounty of scattered gold. Ultimately this 'Black river', 'River of death' in a nutshell comes to objectify the true facts of living (living under pollution, corruption and superstition) in this part of the world. The narrator further aggravates the mythic situation by evoking myth of 'Mother Ganga': 'Daughter of the Vedas', 'river of illumination', 'protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth'. 'Everywhere this river

flows that area is the darkness' (Adiga 15). The description of the village temple although managed realistically, is an effort to fit it in the conventional ideological framework of a powerful cultural institution: "...a tall, whitewashed, cone like tower with black intertwining snakes painted on all its sides" (Adiga 19). The central deity of the temple – a 'Saffron-coloured creature' Hanuman, 'half man half monkey' is mockingly presented in order to heighten the meek, servile manner of the Indian people; faithfulness in servitude becomes the goal to achieve. Again some conscious efforts have been invested to romanticize and to mystify the presence of 'the Black Fort'. The fort on the crest of the hill, built centuries ago is now abandoned and its obscurity tantalizes and frightens the local village people. Later on it becomes the symbol of the throne of India (occupied by monkeys); in Balram's imagination 'an enormous lizard' lived there; myth and gossip stories are merged with the association of the monkeys and the 'reincarnated souls'. However, the 'Black fort' turns into a concrete symbol at Balram's first visit there: it seemed to have provoked his hidden desires. All these are to invest awe inspiring features to quench the western thirst for mysterious India. Ritual and superstition are combined in the elaborate description of the last rites of Munna's mother. Covering the corpse with 'a saffron silk cloth' and with chanting 'Shiva's name' the gaudy procession came to the burning ghat. Now, burning the dead body is the Eastern idea of purification, sanctification and renunciation. But the depiction is made to appear in such a way that the process of salvation of the soul becomes antique.

As *The White Tiger* happens to be a tale set in a colonized country the theme of servitude recurs in this novel throughout. China, Afghanistan and Abyssinia resisted service under any country. From the European point of view this is resisting the fruits of civilization; hence, *Exciting Tales of the Exotic East* mostly deals with the pirates and gold in Hong Kong. The case is different with India and its people: willingly or unwillingly they first served under the Mughals and then under the British. So is the case with the protagonist Balram: "I was a servant once". Even the suggestion is that the Indians prey to Hanuman who faithfully served his master Lord Rama for he set an example of 'how to serve his master'. Again Iqbal's poetry is associated with the theme of slavery: slaves cannot appreciate the beauty of the world. However, Balram's fate was 'not to stay a slave'. Balram directly compares himself with the servant God Hanuman while driving Mr. Ashok and Pinky madam. Again displacing Ramprasad, Balram becomes the 'servant number one'; this points to the struggle among the servants for a comparatively better place. 'The fake servant grin' is only a sign of understanding his master like a dog does. The existence of the servant's quarter speaks of the parasitical nature of aristocratic existence; servants, looking like monkeys in uniform are merely 'Alsatian dogs'. Balram's unhygienic habits and red, blackened, rotting teeth symbolically become the features of a whole half-civilized nation. The social hierarchy is working in order to keep most of the people of this country 'to exist in perpetual servitude'. In the first world countries there are many rich people but they have to perform their own

private works of their own, but here in India: millions of poor servants “... get off at their master's posh houses – and then clean the floors, wash the dishes, weed the garden, feed their children, press their feet – all for a pittance” (Adiga 176). Servitude in India, as the narrator implies, is not one's social condition, it is rather there in our blood and instinct: “Once a servant, always a servant: the instinct is always there...” (Adiga 299). Even at the later stage of the story servitude has become Balram's nightmare. At the culmination of the story Balram voices the cry of all colonized people and defends all his heinous adventures just as his extreme urge to know: 'what it means not to be a servant.'

Now, the dominating Western perception comes into play whenever the people of India are addressed or described: 'Thousands and thousands of them' become so much like the faceless workers of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The small brown men of India with their 'popped out eyes and stubby moustache' (39) are again and again categorically put throughout the novel, as: 'could be half the men in India; 'thin bodies, filthy faces ... the animal-like way they live' (Adiga 120). The police poster presenting an effeminate and weak Balram ('Blakish', 'Thin', 'Small') is just one instance of the many undervalued depiction of the people of India. In Balram's rural household the buffalo is fed before human beings partly displaying religious belief and partly an effort to show the insignificance of human life in this Indian context. The tendency to homogenize Indian people abounds in the novel: 'the road is full of them – thin, sticklike men.' In Bangalore the passerby identifies himself with fugitive Balram's poster and the narrator significantly comments: '...it could be the face of half the men in India'; they are like 'mound of indistinguishable bodies' without individuality or any personal identity. Sometimes human beings are interpreted through animal images and actions: for instance, each of the landlords of Laxmangarh is given animal names according to their behavior. The rickshaw pullers are simply 'beasts of burden'. And using this refrain the whole Indian village society is compared with a jungle, full of ignorant beasts lurching in darkness. After that in its prosperous time India 'was like a zoo. A clean, well-kept, orderly zoo'; but after its independence from the British rule “... the cages has been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart” (Adiga 64). Here the implication is that the British Govt. was quite successful in its noble mission of enlightening the native people. Thus the idea of the 'White man's burden' resurfaces. The narrator's mode of presentation allows the 'conventional' constructed view of India to intervene with facts which reaches its climax when in a soliloquy Balram repents his past life (brought up in 'filth' 'to live like an animal?').

The obsession and the tendency to categorize human beings regarding their skin colour vehemently persist in the novel. One might be reminded here of Said's concept that the superiority of the skin colour (white) was one mode of inducing slavery to the natives for black was made to appear naturally inferior. Our narrator seems to have gladly accepted the distinction as he goes on to label the Chinese as 'Yellow men', the Indian as 'Brown men' while the colonial rulers are 'White skinned'. The reference to the 'skin-whitener' cream seems to be a vain effort to catch

the Western standard of existence: so that, 'Indian men can look white as westerners'. The case reaches vulgarity when we find that in a red light area some girls are dressed as 'American' to tantalize the customers; this is a case of skin fetishism (however, Balram prefers the 'light-skinned' Nepaleses). A person whose whole body has been discoloured due to disease, at first glance draws respect and attention of other fellows as 'An American'. Apart from these 'the mascot of the gym – an American with enormous white muscles' fascinates all; Balram keeps as memento the 'strand of golden hair' of the Russian whore. The most obviously overt statement regarding skin colour comes with: 'White skin has to be respected' (Adiga 228); the essence of orientalism is inculcated through this scathing statement. Along with this precondition of skin colour it must be noted that the reference to 'Darkness' or 'Blackness' reverberates throughout this novel. The narrator begins by praying to God 'to shine light' on his 'dark story'. The sophisticated city of Bangalore is the harbinger of light but the average rural India is mired in 'Darkness'. Coal pits, black money and grim corruption have been deftly associated to emphasize the pervasive darkness overcast everywhere. Balram and other drivers are easily recognized as persons from 'darkness' and his journey from Dhanbad to Delhi is seen as a journey from darkness to light. Industrial pollution has made small rivers literally 'black'.

Adiga is quite successful in creating a realistic Indian ambience with subtle touches and minute details: be it the turban of the sikh driver, or the smoking of hookah, or chewing of beetle leaves or even the pecking of teeth with neem sticks. Amid this a subterranean Marxist conflict between different social and economic groups in a politically sensitive atmosphere is incorporated into the body of the narrative. But while presenting the pictures of social mobility and extremes of poverty his views get stifled under the provocative influence of a dominating western culture. Thus his efforts to reestablish the image of Indian socio-cultural life end up becoming biased and exaggerated. Conventional Eurocentric perspective and reality mingles through the artistic lucidity of the narrator's voice. When the narrator was ruminating about his own childhood we encounter the complexity of attaining individual distinction through names for here in the rural villages there is no formal way to name a baby: 'Munna' is Munna because his parents 'forget to name their child(ren)'. Then the inadequacy of the education system has been pointed out by the narrator when he considers himself as 'half-baked' Indian: for he and millions like him 'were never allowed to complete their schooling'. The result is equally pathetic: the system leaves us with 'half-cooked' and 'half-formed' ideas. In order to convey the true nature of the exploitation he imagines himself 'caught in the Rooster Coop'. Almost everyone is working for the convenience of a lucky few who happens to be comfortably placed at the top of the social and economic ladder. The same is evident with the portrayal of the people of the semi-feudal world of Laxmangarh: they are trapped, subdued and totally shunned of opportunities and facilities. The inhuman condition of the village hospital, the harsh indifference towards the working class sentimentality, the coercive-rigging in the name of

election and democracy and bribing the political leaders under broad day light coupled with disrespect for duty and ideals of loyalty and oppressive social norms which ignore the basic humanity take us back to a country of a pre-enlightenment era and it dismantles the identity of India as a developing economy. The country with an ultra modern city like Bangalore and all its entrepreneurs is submerged under the shadow of a third world country which is both 'constructed' and 'recognizable' by an omnipresent western ideology. And if to go by Fredric Jameson: in the third world 'the telling of the individual story or experience is the laborious telling of the experience of the collective self' (Nayar 130), the narrator's individual encounters in life becomes the reality for a whole nation.

Throughout I tried to show that Adiga's *The White Tiger* on various occasions captures the 'imaginative Geography' of the Orientalist thought. Thus India's postcolonial achievements are undervalued; and the indigenous culture and tradition is forced to bow under a colonial tendency to legitimize the stereotypical image of India. To consider the nation's history as a whole, to question the assumptions of white discourse and to move away from 'nativism' are the means suggested by E. Said in *Culture and Imperialism* to counter the dominating culture and to replace them with a newly integrated narrative style.^{iv} But *The White Tiger* does not show any inclination to decolonize the narrative structure. Balram's adoption of a distinct social life and his learning of the fragments of English language (colonizer's language: obviously reminds of Caliban's case in *The Tempest*) suggests the possibility of a new paradigm (more than mere 'Civil-savages') for the working class. But the situation couldn't be balanced properly. The author could not resist the Eurocentric model of dominating discourse and thus reinforced the discrimination and stereotypes instead of deconstructing them.

End Notes:

- i As quoted in P. Waugh. *Literary Theory and Criticism*. London: Oxford UP, 2006. Print.
- ii L. Lau & A. C. Mendes (eds.). *Re-Orientalism and the South Asian Identity Politics: the Oriental Other Within*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- iii M. Chowdhury & C. Jain in "Sad, Bad and the Mysterious Indian: Exploring the Image of the Indian" have made an elaborate attempt on these novels.
- iv Lily Want

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