

Re-Inscription of National Imaginary or Re-Exoticisation of India: A Study of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract – *The present paper aims to locate Aravind Adiga's novel The White Tiger (2008) in the light of two extremely polarised views of literary critics about the manner in which Adiga represents the national imaginary. One group of critics comprising M. A. Chaudhary, P. Deswal, and S. Maji opines that the novel interrogates the paradigms of national imaginary of India and tries to locate a space for the subaltern in the myths of new India. The other group of scholars comprising Akram Pouralifard, L. Want, Ana Cristina Mendes and Megha Anwar interpret the novel as a representation of India as the exotic other of the West in the new world order. This group also attempts to analyse the novel in relation to the politics regarding the portrayal of the subaltern in the new world order. Both views have their subscribers as well as detractors. The paper aims to study the macro factors governing the two polarities by focusing on anxieties and slippages in the internal discourse of the novel, whereby it partakes in the political economy of neo-liberal India.*

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The term 'imaginary' can be defined as the set of images, institutions, values and laws that are common to a particular social group, which in turn, defines itself and its social relations through these images and values. Charles Taylor has conceptualised the term imaginary as "the way a given people imagine their collective social life which enables at the same time sense making processes and practices" (Kim). Imaginaries are, in fact, constructed, transmitted and contested in multiple forms which might consist of images, narratives and institutional practices. National imaginary can be termed as a set of metaphors and symbols through which a particular nation is imagined and concretised. A nation is much more than mere geographical entity with definite political frontiers. It also refers to peculiar psychic space where history, memory and certain images intermingle to imagine and execute 'nationness' as Homi K Bhabha has put it succinctly, "Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eyes" (1). It is the act of this intermingling that situates a nation in the mind of its populace, making it as concrete and real as its geographical entities. It is a formidable challenge for any nation-state to continuously invent, erase and reinvent the national imaginary through certain narrative tropes, discursive and institutional practices to interpellate the national subject vis-à-vis a certain ideological position.

Famous Marxist critic Perry Anderson, in his work *The Indian Ideology* (2012), professes that the main carrier of the central images defining national imaginary of

India has been "the liberal mainstream of Indian intellectual life" (3). This liberalism forms the set of knowledge gathered around the idea of India, thereby producing certain images of India to the Indians themselves and to the rest of the world. He points out four tropes that are central in understanding the content of the images of India being offered: "antiquity-continuity; diversity-unity; massivity-democracy; multi-confessionality-secularity" (9).

The first combination of "antiquity-continuity" professes India to be an ancient civilisation that has an inbuilt teleological aim of continuing its uninterrupted march since ages in which "the dream of unity has occupied the mind of India since the dawn of civilization" (Nehru 50). India has been projected as the seat of ancient civilisation, offering panacea to all the ills of modern life, primarily through its religious mode of being and the concept of righteousness of action. The institution of family also occupies a central place in this presentation. It is through this fusion of antiquity and continuity that religion has quietly treaded the political imagination of India as the ancient India was imagined and represented as essentially a religious civilisation, standing in binary opposition to the modern western civilisation. The river Ganga has also been very significant in this galaxy of symbols. It has been celebrated as lifeline of the civilisation, the liberator and the ultimate preserver as Nehru famously proclaimed in his "Last Will and Testament": "the

Ganga, especially, is the river of India, beloved of our people, around which are intertwined her memories, her hopes, her fears, her song of triumphs, her victories and her defeats. She has been a symbol of India's age-long culture and civilization, ever-changing, ever flowing, and yet ever the same Ganga" (qtd. in Guha 96). It, therefore, follows that the image of the river Ganga is a condensed metaphor forming the confluence of the tropes of continuity and religiosity. This confluence leads to juxtaposition of multi-confessionality of diverse religions and beliefs in a heterogeneous society in which various ethnic and religious groups are located in a state of simultaneous tension and mutual-reliance and where the state claims to play a non-partisan role in the religious affairs of the people. In the same manner, the diversity-unity trope represents India as a land of diverse socio-cultural ethos, "making its inhabitants throughout these ages distinctively Indian, with the same national heritage and the same set of moral and mental qualities" (Nehru 47). The representation keeps the above mentioned tension, dependence and an ever lurking possibility of an over-reaching national identity open.

The combination of massivity-democracy assigns India the tag of 'the largest democracy in the world' and portrays Indian democracy as the past as well as the future of the European Union (Guha 767-768). It also declares it to be the only non-western nation to choose "a resolutely democratic constitution" (Sen 12). Sunil Khilnani has eulogised Indian democracy as a significant movement in the global march of democracy after the experiments in America and France at the fag end of 18th century (4).

This, however, is only one side of the coin. In the last few decades, especially since the introduction of neo-liberal policies in the early 1990s, the national imaginary of India has been scrutinised from different perspectives. The space that the Congress offered to multiple ideologies has been strained, resulting in opening up of multiple possibilities. The rooting of democracy in India, the political mobilisation of the subaltern classes and the simultaneous rise of the right wing politics are the factors that have changed multiple equations. On one hand, there is an ever-growing assertion of the subaltern classes demanding their due space in the national imaginary. On the other, there is the right wing proclaiming to give a further rightward turn to the national imaginary. The assertion of the subaltern groups is marked by a paradox. The elevation of a few to the pedestal of power has not resulted in universal emancipation for all of them. In other words, it has not made the power structures more humane or answerable. Rather, with the introduction of the neo-liberal policies, there has emerged a nexus between the neo-elite among the subaltern and the established elite, collectively plundering the resources of the nation and creating an ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots. The result is that there is an acute sense of insecurity among the higher caste middle class people,

paralleled by an even acute sense of resentment among the classes left at the dark bottom of 'shining India'.

The socio-political scenario of the first decade of the new millennium has been, therefore, marked by a cacophony consisting of the shrilling voices of multiple alliances. These alliances consist of the local and the international capitalist class and the political elite, shifting the focus of the state from a limited welfare model to a polity centering around ethnicity and identity, a rightward turn of the middle class, the asserting subaltern elite and people at the rock bottom in the mad race let lose by neo-liberal policies.

In addition to this, the literary narration of the Indian nation has been influenced a great deal by the issue of the potential audience. The representation of India has always been of considerable interest to the western audience. In fact, there is a certain ambivalence marked by a simultaneous compulsion and repulsion of India as the other of the West. It also involves the political economy of the representation. During the hay days of the Raj, there were certain codes consisting of image of India as an exotic space, the land of spirituality, caste system and the ultimate enigma; refusing to unravel itself. These codes, in fact, lied at the core of the imagination of the West. An intriguing fact, however, is that the same codes defined the area of operation of the images of India carved out by the Indians themselves. There were two imperatives that defined the contours of the images of the local artists. First of all, the West always represented itself as essentially rational, logical and scientific. This self-portrayal of the West and the narrative built around it was so compelling that it forced the Indians to look for different images to assign themselves some independent space and an autonomous identity. The will to an unregimented self ended up in creating counter-narratives around the images of India as the perfect other of the West. Hence, India was offered to the western eyes as a storehouse of spiritual values, cradle of familial and social virtues, the land of renunciation etc. In representing India, it has been imperative to consider market and institutional forces that have presented themselves as strong contingent of the western audience offering critical recognition, financial benefits and acceptability as a man of letters back home.

The fascination of the West to the enigma called India has continued till date. But the nature of power equations involved as well as the positioning of both the sides has altered somewhat since the introduction of neo-liberal policies. The impressive economic growth rate of India in the recent decades that has made it a huge market for the international capital, the rooting of democracy in the wilderness called India and the geo-strategic location of India in the new world order have re-scripted the situation somewhat. The contours of the images of India

have changed without making a major shift in the narrative. Earlier, it was the image of India as the spiritual other of the West that was at the center of representation of India; now it is the image of India as the exotic slumdog millionaire- the corrupt and degraded copy of the western modernity that occupies the centre stage. In other words, India is still 'the other' to the western world. There is no doubt that the desire of the West to represent India is marked by a certain ambivalence as well as contradictory wishes. However, there has always been employed a displacement of uneasiness in the form of exoticisation of other as a set of "innocent signifiers", as the "one that could titillate the European public imagination while offering no threat since such exotics" are "non-systematic" (Ashcroft 95). In other words, the exotic other is the other that can be tamed easily and presented as per one's own projections. So the chaotic and "non-systematic" India becomes a non-threatening entity to the western imagination. In the context of the present paper, the image of India as the 'exotic other' in the form of corrupt and degraded copy of the West has been analysed. The focus has also been on internal fissures of this imagination, whereby the West negotiates and reflects the challenges that India poses in the new world.

The genre of novel, that has always been a front runner in imagining a nation, has always interacted with these tropes, albeit in different directions. Different writers have responded differently to these tropes, depending on their situatedness as writers and their individuality as creative artists who have always entered into dialogue with the national imaginary.

The analysis of the text will focus on the twin structures and where it can be situated vis-à-vis the two paradigms. The first part of the analysis will focus on how *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga is a literary manifestation of the restructuring of national imaginary of India. The novel interrogates and scrutinises the images lying at the foundations of the prevailing national imaginary. In fact, in one of his interviews with Lee Thomas, Adiga has clearly manifested his motive behind writing this novel:

Every other country in South Asia- Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka- is on fire; every other country is going through a civil war because it has fallen for its own myths. In Pakistan, the myth of the 3 protecting As- Allah, America, Army- have destroyed the country. In Nepal: the myth of the divine monarchy. In India too, we have our myths-God, Gandhi, and family-but we have always questioned these myths enough, we have allowed room for dissension. And so we alone thrive while South Asia burns. In the past ten years, however, these dominant myths have grown stronger and the space for self-questioning has diminished within India. The majority of the country is still poor-up to 700 million Indians live in poverty-and the poor are no longer happy to keep quiet. The government isn't investing in the schools, hospitals,

and jobs that will allow these poor people to rise. Aspiration grows, but not opportunity.

As mentioned by Adiga, the key tropes of the constellation of the myth namely God, Gandhi and family have been put to serious questioning in the novel. In fact, the novel traces the nexus between the three tropes that legitimises and internalises the Indian ideology. Adiga has made a relentless attack on the tropes and metaphors defining the Indian national imaginary. For him, it is the dangerous confluence of the tropes and metaphors that ultimately interpolates the subjected in such a manner that they do not find themselves benefited in any way from the rhetoric of freedom.

In the very beginning of the letter to the Chinese Premier, the narrator divides India into two categories. - "an India of Light and an India of Darkness" (14). The India of light is India near the ocean i.e. South India, the place said to have been on the margins of national imaginary. The place is, ironically, far away from the river Ganga as Adiga draws a line between the India of ocean and the India of the river:

Ocean brings light to my country. Every place near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India- the black India.

Which black river am I talking of- which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it?

Why, I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illuminations, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness. (14-15)

The imagining of the connotations around the central symbol of the Ganga is in direct contrast to the ones used by Nehru and other nationalist leaders. For the narrator, the image of the river has been put at the centre of the Indian ideology spreading fatalism and superstitions among the masses. The beginning of the novel portrays the pathetic sight of human corpses being cremated on the banks of the river. In fact, the narration of the rituals performed is marked by a certain black humour and sly tone. The imagery of decay, corruption and confusion with a strong element of disgust in the tone dominates the narration: "I smelled the river before I saw it: a stench of decaying flesh rising from my right. I sang louder... the only truth!"(16).

In the same manner, describing his mother's cremation the narrator says:

As the fire ate away the satin, a pale foot jerked out, like a living thing; the toes which were melting in the heat, began to curl up, offering resistance to what was being done to them...Underneath the platform

with piled-up fire logs, there was a giant oozing mound of black mud where the river washed into the shore. The mound was littered with ribbons of jasmine, rose petals, bits of satin, charred bones; a pale skinned dog was crawling and sniffing through the petals and satin and charred bones. (17)

The disgust and a sense of waste are easily noticeable in the tone and imagery exposing the ideology at work by looking at the river from a certain distance, thereby portraying the interpellation of the subject vis-a-vis the given action. Hence, the typical mystification and glorification of the river Ganga is done away with and the entire rationale is turned upside down. The divinity and otherworldliness of the river is replaced by the portrayal of the action in its connotative form, where "stench", "odour", dogs and human remains intermingle with each other (17).

Representation of the river Ganga as the ultimate reservoir of the Indian civilisation, a place from where everything is born and dies into, only to be born again, has also been scrutinised in the novel. In fact, the idea of liberation which is very closely associated with the river has been turned on its head to represent it as the reservoir of black mud, decomposed dead bodies, pollution and smell; simply not capable of offering any salvation as the narrator proclaims: "And then I understood: this was the real god of Benaras- this black mud of the Ganga into which everything died, and decomposed, and was reborn from, and died into again...Nothing would get liberated here"(18).

The author seems to assert that the black mud of the Ganga with decomposed human flesh being eaten by dogs can not be the way to liberation. Rather, it seems to represent the decay in the central motif of the myths created by the Indian nation by exposing its vulnerability and inability to sustain the glory attached to it.

The trope of the river Ganga is at the centre of the metaphor of religion which has been propagated as the defining feature of Indianness. It has been proclaimed by many epoch making thinkers of India that it is the peculiar religious mode of Indian experience that sets it apart from the rest of the world in general and the West in particular. For them, it is the idea of detached action, i.e. an action performed without craving for the fruit of the action that can cure the world of its selfishness and self-centeredness causing all the havocs in the world that defines true Indianess. However, the narrator interrogates the politics of the same action. The entire narrative is nothing but an attempt to acknowledge that no such mode of action is possible as it is the human selfishness that lies at the heart of every action as the ultimate reinforcement. The narrator also implies that the religious rituals practiced in India do not let a major part of the population realise this simple fact of life by filling in them an attitude of servitude and unconditional fidelity to the master. Hence, an unquestionable lineage to authority and a fatalist

approach to life are instilled in them. The narrator brings home the point through the image of Hanuman- "half man, half monkey" god. He says:

Inside, you will find an image of a saffron-coloured creature, half man half monkey: this is Hanuman, everyone's favourite god in the darkness. Do you know about Hanuman, sir? He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your master with absolute fidelity, love and devotion.

These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us, Mr. Jiabao. Understand, now, how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India. (19)

For the narrator, another institution that lies at the core of the so called Indian values instilling the feelings of servitude and unquestionable fidelity among Indians is that of 'family'. The institution of family and one's given commitment to it have always been defining features of the representation of the country to the outside world and the popular cultural practices within the country. The narrator terms it the ultimate impediment in the personal liberation and names it "Rooster Coop"- a system where members of a group watch one another being slaughtered one by one, but are unable or unwilling to rebel and break free out of the coop. Interestingly, the coop is guarded from inside and has such a compelling psychological control over its members that they do not even wish to be set free.

The myth and legends created around the figure of Gandhi have also occupied a central place in the Indian national imaginary. As mentioned above, his teaching of non- violence that is proclaimed to have guided the greatest nationalist struggle, is represented as a colossal achievement and a lesson for others to learn from. Even in the public domain in India, any fight against the state that deviates from the Gandhian principles is immediately termed illegitimate. However, the novel foregrounds the inherent possibility of violence in the Indian society caused by unjust and unequal power relations prevailing in it. The violence committed by Balram is, in fact, symptomatic of the latent violence lying at the bottom, which if not addressed properly, might easily spread all over the nation. In the narrative, the violent act of killing his own owner is, for Balram, the only the way to escape from the Rooster Coop. He could never forget how he was made to sign a document whereby he was asked to make a confession of a crime committed by Mr. Ashok's wife. Moreover, time and again, the narrative seems to mock the Gandhian narrative of self-sacrifice and self-restraint. In the end, the narrator makes the ultimate statement by offering to open a school that will focus on the hard and harsh facts of life and will not promote any idealism that ultimately serves the interests of the ruling class- "A school where you wouldn't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with

prayers and stories about God or Gandhi- nothing but the facts of life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers unleashed on Bangalore!" (319).

The novel has also interrogated the other important trope of democracy by offering its very complex picture in the Indian context. There are two parallel dimensions of democracy portrayed in the novel. The first dimension focuses on the farce of election in the largest democracy of the world, i.e. how voters are registered and a victory in the election is managed. The second one is far more intriguing. It is about the rise of backward classes to prominence which is nothing less than a miracle. The journey of Balram from a remote village to Ranchi, Delhi and finally to Bangalore has a parallel match in the rise of the Great Socialist, a prominent political leader from marginalized section of society, to occupy the seat of prominence. The Great Socialist, like the proclamations of the Indian nation- state, is a socialist in nomenclature only. His elevation to the pedestal of power does not alter the ground reality. Rather, his rise is a mere token gesture giving outlet to the suppressed anger of the deprived masses. The people vote him into power not because he changes their material conditions; but because he has the audacity to insult the people of the higher castes at will: "That was the positive side of the Great Socialist. He humiliated all our masters- that is why we kept voting him back in." (105). He is at the centre of the nefarious nexus between the political class and business class that has prospered the most in the neo-liberal India, plundering the national resources as he warns the family of Balram's master:

Bullshit. You got a good scam going here- taking coal for free from the government mines. You've got it going because I let it happen. You were just some little village landlord when I found you- I brought you here- I made you what you are today: and by God, you cross me, and you'll go back there into that village. I said a million and a fucking half, and I mean a million and... (104-105)

So, here we are into the heart of new India with its unique social and economic justice forming a new power alliance where a minute section of the deprived finds a place for itself and becomes a part of the collective loot. At another level, the Great Socialist also stands for the failure of collective energies of the deprived, forcing the narrator to proclaim that "an Indian revolution" in the manner of the French revolution or the Russian revolution is highly unlikely to happen, he declares:

An Indian revolution?

No, sir. It won't happen. People in this country are still waiting for the war of their freedom to come from somewhere else- from the jungles, from the mountains, from China, from Pakistan. That will never happen. Every man must make his own Benaras. (304)

It is this proclamation of creating one's "own Benaras" that paves the way for a different reading of the text. It is this individual rise fueled by "self-consolidating project" that reinforces the success journey of Balram, the Great Socialist and Vijay, the first entrepreneur that the narrator bore witness to (Pourqoli). Balram never identifies himself with the deprived. Right from his childhood, he has an innate sense of being a special child, or the real white tiger. Referring to the suppressed desire of his father, he says, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine- at least one- should live like a man" (19). Even in his childhood, the only man he identifies with and wants to emulate is Vijay, the bus conductor. He continues to ruminate "I wanted to be like Vijay- with a uniform, a paycheck...and people looking at me with eyes that said, how important he looks..." (20). It is this desire to be an important person that produces in him a vacuum that he tries to fulfill with the images of his self offered by symbolic order. Therefore, in the entire novel, the moral degradation of Balram is paralleled by that of his master Ashok, who acquires a strong hold on his self even after being murdered by Balram as he names himself Ashok and exclaims: "Yes, Ashok! That's what I call myself these days. Mr. Ashok Sharma, North Indian Entrepreneur, settled in Bangalore" (181). By naming himself Ashok Sharma, he pines for "a position which was ideologically and socially restricted for him" (Mendes). His master becomes his real master, overtakes his identity and assumes a part of his being. This indispensability of the master and Balram's psychological compulsion to adopt him posthumously speaks volumes for his thirst to acquire a place in the system that his master represented. The act of writing a letter to Mr. Jiabao, as one of his kind, is also symptomatic of Balram's desire to narrate his story for recognition from someone from the elite class.

This game of identification does not end here. It paves way to a new form of Orientalism. Balram's ultimate aim to open an English school minus Gandhi and God has ambiguous implications. It can be akin to seeking legitimacy for the intellectual premises and paradigms of the western systems of knowledge by being the real mimic man that Macaulay prophesied in his rather infamous Minutes.

In addition to this, it is also interesting to note that there is a parallel rise of the Great Socialist and Balram in the novel. Balram's movement from the village to Ranchi, from Ranchi to Delhi and finally from Delhi to Bangalore is matched by an overwhelming march of the Great Socialist to these places. The individual rise of Balram, as mentioned above, is like fixing a new cog in the massive machinery. It might symbolise a personal triumph for him without changing even an iota of the existing system. Lily Want corroborates:

Through Balram's adoption of a distinct social behaviour, he...participates in the process by which existing institutions and structures of power are produced. In other words, there is no attempt to alter the existing categories and system of thought, even as he dialectically represents and reinforces class conflict and class distinction.

In the same manner, the meticulous rise of the Great Socialist does not make the political or economic system socialist. Rather, his rise is a part of the political economy of neo-liberalism that has nurtured ethnic identities and selected only a few from the subaltern classes for a rise to the pedestal of power. This is done maliciously to create further cracks in an already divided society, to avoid concentrated attack and to seek legitimacy in the eyes of the subaltern classes without significantly changing their material conditions.

On the whole, the scrutiny of the national imaginary might look revolutionary in the first instance, exposing the cracks and fissures in it, thereby challenging the hegemony of the ruling class. But the alternatives that the text propounds might offer only cosmetic changes without challenging the self-created myths. Undoubtedly, the novel offers a substantial critique of the national imaginary of India. However, it also shares an ambiguous relationship with the orientalist codes and the political economy of the neo-liberal India, unwittingly consolidating their rationale and logic.

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