RECOGNIZABLE IMAGES OF 'DARK INDIA': ORIENTALISM AND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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ABSTRACT

Orientalism is a much discussed and debated term in postcolonial studies. It has acquired many shades of meaning through centuries. Starting off as a scholarly discipline in the Western academia, orientalism went on to achieve notoriety as a hegemonic discourse that produced the ideological basis for the European colonization. Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger unsparingly captures the imaginative geography of the orientalist thought as it undermines India's postcolonial achievements and accomplishments. In spite of dismantling and decolonizing the narrative structure, it depicts how indigenous culture and tradition are forced to bow under a colonial tendency to legitimize the stereotypical image of India. This paper will endeavour to study how Aravind Adiga could not resist the colonial tendency or framework to see the native traditions and cultures as something inferior and subservient, and how he meekly grabbed the Eurocentric model of dominating discourse and, thus, reinforced the discrimination and stereotypes instead of deconstructing them.

Key Words: *Postcolonial Studies, Eurocentric Model, Colonial Tendency, Dominating Discourse, Stereotypes.*

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 homogeneous standard of rural Indian life. In contrast to the elitist lifestyle of the city of Bangalore is present the superstitious illiterate village of Laxmangarh which adds 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. The narrator's obsession with 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. Edward Said's 'orientalism' (simply put, the word suggests an academic discipline focusing on the study of oriental culture and language) centres 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 prominence of everything 'occidental'. The East exists in the western psyche as 'fascinating', 'exotic', 'mystical' and the 'seductive'. Its people, assumed as homogeneous 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, reconstructing and having authority over the Orient".[1] 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 generalising and universalising trends. However, since the 1980s Saidian ideas are 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 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 the exoticist image of 'Dark' India and the book re- orientalises (Lisa Lau's term, meaning the perpetration and development of orientalism by the orientals)[2] the representation while deconstructing the fairy tale myth about world's spiritual capital. Its appraisal in the Western reception confirms the jargons about 'the other India, and consequently it raises the issue of the encounter between the orientalised 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 Lakshmangarh. He thoroughly depicts his family background, his short-lived school life, his fear of the lizards, the suppression of the proletariat by the rich zamindars, 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. *The Culturalization of Caste in India: Identity and Inequality in a Multicultural Age* by Balmurli Natrajan analyses 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 overcrowded and politically corrupt Bombay; or Martel's *Life of Pi*, a small slim man with an Indian complexion. *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, curtsey or punctuality…..'',[3] 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-westernised cities boasting of technology and progress; sea ('Ocean') itself metonymically stands here as the 'well off' Western civilization.

At the outset the book is a thorough assessment of the social reality of India. It is a study of the contrast between India rising as a powerful global economy and the emaciating and pervasive poverty. 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" [4] and the setting of Bangalore and Delhi with their sophisticated, elitist lifestyle, 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 superstitions, customs and symbolic actions: for instance, a film begins by showing the image of goddess Laxmi 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's decoration of car with 'the small statue of Goddess Laxmi', 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 finally established than the belief and sincerity that run behind them. Through the ages the river has always been the provider for the Indian civilization. The value of the mythic river, the Ganga, 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".[5] The description of the village temple although managed realistically is an effort to fit in the conventional ideological framework of a powerful cultural institution, "……a tall, whitewashed, cone like tower with black intertwining snakes pointed on all its sides"[6] The central deity of the temple – a saffron coloured creature like Hanuman, 'half man and 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 abandoned and obscurity tantalizes and frightens the local villagers. 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 gossipy 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 superstitions 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 the salvation of soul becomes antique.

As The *White Tiger* happens to be a tale in a colonised country, the theme of servitude recurs in this novel throughout. China, Afghanistan and Abyssinia resisted servitude 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. Even the suggestion is that the Indians pray to Hanuman who faithfully served his master Lord Ram and 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-

civilised 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 personal work, but here in India millions of poor servants "……at their master's posh houses…….clean the floors, wash dishes, weed the garden, feed their children, press their feet – all for a pittance".[7] Servitude in India, as the narrative 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….."[8] Even at the latter stage of the story servitude has become Balram's nightmare. At the culmination of the story Balram voices the cry of all colonised 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 and described. They are described as faceless workers of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The small brown men of India with their popped out eyes and stubby moustache 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"[9] The police poster presenting an effeminate and weak Balram is just one instance of the many undervalued depiction of the people of India. In Balam'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 homogenise Indian people abounds in the novel. 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 behaviour. 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. 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".[10] Here the implication is that the British government was quite successful in its noble mission of enlightening the native people. Thus the idea of Whiteman's burden resurfaces. The narrator's mode of presentation allows the conventional constructed view of India to intervene with the facts which reaches its climax when in a soliloquy Balram repents his past life.

The obsession and the tendency to categorize human beings regarding their skin colour vehemently persist in the novel. One might be reminded 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. The 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 Americans to tantalize the customers, this is a case of skin fetishism. A person whose whole body has been discoloured due to disease, at first glance, draws respect and attention of other fellows as an American. The most obviously overt statement

regarding skin colour comes with the statement that "White skin has to be respected".[11] Along with this precondition of skin colour it must be noted that the reference to darkness or blackness reverberates throughout the novel. 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 recognised 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 the hookah, or chewing of beetle leaves or even the pecking of teeth with neem sticks. Amid this a subterraneous 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 re-establish the image of Indian socio-cultural life end up as 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 happen to be comfortably placed at the top of the social and economic ladder. The same is evident with the portrayal of the people or 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 daylight 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 are submerged under the shadow of a third world economy which is both constructed and recognizable by an omnipresent Western ideology. And if we go by Fredric Jameson in the third world, 'the telling of the individual story or experience is the laborious telling of experience of the collective self'[12], the narrator's individual encounters in life become the reality for a whole nation.

The attempt has been made 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 are forced to bow under a colonial tendency to legitimatize 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 Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* to counter the dominating culture and to replace them with a newly integrated narrative style. *The White Tiger* does not show any inclination to decolonise 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 which the author has failed to devise and bank up on. And, therefore, he could not resist the conceptual and superior intellectual framework. So, he meekly grabbed the Eurocentric model of dominating discourse and reinforced the discrimination and stereotypes instead of deconstructing them.

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