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The White Tiger: The Beggar's Booker

This paper deals with the changing dynamics of postcolonial literature by focussing on the 2008 Man Booker Prize-winning novel, *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga. I argue that when placed in the context of Indian postcolonial fiction in English, Adiga's novel can be seen on the surface as representing significant ruptures with existing paradigms of postcolonial literature. Further probing, however, reveals underlying continuities with the Indian postcolonial novel, in terms of thematic preoccupations as well as recurrent tropes. Studying these convergences and divergences will thus enable us to appreciate the reappraisals of postcolonial themes in a neocolonial context.

At the risk of mixing animal metaphors, it may be said that Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* was the proverbial "black horse" in the Man Booker Prize shortlist for 2008. Having received little critical attention in India prior to being shortlisted for the Booker, the fact that it outpaced its contenders including *The Sea of Poppies*, a novel by fellow Indian writer, Amitav Ghosh, perhaps accounts for the mixed reactions it received in India. Detractors of the novel, though aware that the prize had been awarded to *débutant* writers such as Arundhati Roy and D.B.C. Pierre in the past, still fumed: Why had a novice like Adiga and not a literary stalwart like Amitav Ghosh been chosen? Did this reflect a trend of "giving prizes to 'accessible' books"[1]? Admirers of the novel, on the other hand, celebrated its stinging critique of contemporary India: "until Adiga, India Unlit had not really found a voice in the babel of India Shining" (Kanjilal).

What is of interest is not the divergence of opinions concerning the judiciousness of awarding the prize to Adiga, but the underlying consensus that Adiga's novel represents something different, which does not conform to expectations of readers, at least in India, vis-à-vis the Indian novel in English. It is this sense of rupture, of departure from the project of Indian writing in English that I would like to explore in this paper by attempting to tentatively situate Adiga's novel with respect to Indian postcolonial fiction in English. Does it represent a turning-point in Indian fiction in English as some reviewers seem to suggest? Or can we discern both breaks and bridges between *The White Tiger* and other works of the modern Indian literary postcolonial pantheon which may prompt reflections of a more general nature on the production and reception of Indian fiction at home and abroad?

Before I proceed, a brief disclaimer is in order. It is perhaps too early to judge Adiga's place in Indian fiction. What is possible, however, is to critically appreciate the resurgences of postcolonial themes in the neocolonial context of the novel. In order to position *The White Tiger* with respect to the Indian postcolonial novel, I would like to focus on the question of reader expectations and how this appears to have shaped literary production in India. Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Perishable Empire* judiciously points out that "one implicit expectation from Third World cosmopolitan writers (also known as postcolonials) is that they will highlight the experience of colonialism as theme or metaphor" (179). This marks a significant site of disjuncture between Indian novels in English and in regional literatures. Indeed, as opposed to the "urban or diasporic English writer" who is not "directly involved"

1. Ravi Singh, Editor-in-chief of Penguin India, which had initially declined to publish *The White Tiger*, was significantly among those scoffing at the novel's success, notably in an e-mail interview granted to *The Hindustan Times*.

in "issues of caste, subcaste, tribe, tensions and pressures of a convoluted local variety" (199), the vernacular writer tends to focus on "forms of internal dissension, dislocation and oppression… relegating the trauma of the colonial experience to the background." (180)

Grounding my investigations in the context explained above, I would like to argue that Adiga's *The White Tiger* represents an attempt to move beyond the tendency to privilege "colonialism as the framework for the major cultural experience of the century" (Mukherjee, 179) in English Indian fiction. *The White Tiger* is presented entirely from the point of view of Balram, a servant whose existence is marked by social discrimination. For Balram, colonialism, far from being the prism through which Indian postcolonial reality is perceived, is merely one of many successive waves of oppression. Retrospectively, the struggle for independence from the British becomes a source of irony rather than euphoria, as Balram makes clear: "For this land, India has never been free. First the Muslims, then the British bossed us around. In 1947, the British left but only a moron would think we became free then". (*WT* 21-22)

This gaze of the subaltern on India and the theme of servants in general can be seen as a site of both continuity and discontinuity between *The White Tiger* and much of Indian postcolonial fiction. *The White Tiger*'s choice of subject—the oppression of servants in India—earned it the epithet of the "*Bhikari's* Booker", which in Hindi means the "Beggar's Booker" (Kulkarni). In effect, it draws on an already firmly established tradition of the rags-to-riches tale, a staple theme of Indian cinema as well as regional Indian literatures. Adiga cleverly updates the storyline of the village bumpkin or "Country Mouse", as the protagonist is nicknamed, who "makes it big" in the city, by interweaving more contemporary issues, particularly India's burgeoning Information Technology industry. Representing a new phase in India's contemporary history, the ever-growing IT sector, based primarily in Bangalore, has enabled the country to make a mark on the global market and rival its powerful neighbor, China. This remarkable success story of a nation is crystallized in the synecdochic figure of Balram Halwawalla alias 'The White Tiger'. In the novel, Balram, a Bangalore-based entrepreneur, traces his rise from an illiterate villager in to a savvy city chauffeur and finally to an owner of a car-service catering to call-centres, through a first-person epistolary narrative.

The choice of a subaltern protagonist is also part of a long line of socially-committed literature which includes the works of Mulk Raj Anand, Karmala Markandaya, Mahashweta Devi and vernacular Dalit literature. Yet, as opposed to, say, Anand, the setting is no longer colonial India but postcolonial India where the servant-master relationship is more than ever riddled with ambivalence. Thus Indians now seem to be the masters of their political destiny, like the Chinese. Hence Adiga's repeated allusions to the present century which belongs to "the *yellow* and *brown* man." (*WT* 5, 7) Indeed, Adiga stresses that these former colonial servants have now become the masters:

> Out of respect for the love and liberty shown by the Chinese people, and also in the belief that the future of the world lies with the yellow man and the brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse, I offer to tell you, free of charge, the truth about Bangalore. (*WT* 5-6)

Paradoxically, Balram's enumeration of the supposed vices of the "white-skinned man", far from amplifying his celebration of the new dominant role played by India and China, undermines it. Despite the grain of truth in Balram's arguments, the absurdity of attributing the decline of the west entirely to "buggery", drugs and mobile phones (which,

according Balram, decrease sexual fertility) prompts us to describe Balram's position as midway between a postcolonial critique of the west and a "neocolonial tall tale", so to speak. The fictitious and exaggerated quality of the tall tale is underscored by Adiga's authorial irony which leads readers to see Balram's mistrust of mobile phones as merely superstitious and his depiction of westerners as caricatured. Behind the bravado of the tall tale lurks the uncomfortable truth that social categories in a neocolonial society are never clear-cut: "boss" Balram, for example, still carries traces of his subaltern origins.

The choice of the first person and the metonymic links between the individual and the nation may on the one hand, be seen as a postcolonial literary device. It can therefore be argued that the Jamesian narrative of an individual as an allegorical mode to express the narrative of a nation persists. Yet Balram is far more a spokesperson for his social class, and this emphasis on class recalls the novels of social realism of Charles Dickens, Emile Zola and Mulk Raj Anand. Balram, for instance, repeatedly says that his face could that of "half the men in India." (*WT* 39, 295) Addressing himself to the Chinese Premier, Balram presents himself as the exemplar of the Indian entrepreneur, who appears to be India's only saving grace, as the catalogue of the shortcomings of Indian society seem to suggest:

> Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. And these entrepreneurs—we entrepreneurs—have set up all these outsourcing companies that virtually run America now. (*WT* 4)

Balram is therefore a synecdochic figure, symbolic of a certain class, and not of the entire nation, as is the case with Rushdie's Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, Allan Sealy's Eugene in *Trotternama* or Shashi Tharoor's Draupadi in *The Great Indian Novel*. A similar rupture occurs in terms of style. Adiga favours the documentary mode, characteristic of social realism, and not the magical realist narratives of Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie. Balram is no child of midnight, born on the eve of Independence, like Rushdie's Saleem Sinai. In fact, such is the crushing poverty of his milieu, that he does not even know when he was born and is only assigned a birthday during elections when it must be proved that he is old enough to vote. Similarly, Balram is no fantastical allegorical figure locked in a reciprocal relationship with history, reflecting and determining the outcome of political in-fighting and international wars. Unlike Saleem, Balram's actions have no direct impact on India's history.

By thus counterpointing Adiga and Rushdie (both winners of the Booker), one can discern a shifting from the postcolonial affirmation of "his story over History" towards a more cynical stock-taking of ground realities. Adiga distances himself from the euphoric Rushdiesque celebration of the individual as an active agent in the historical process. His narrative serves as a grim reminder that individuals cannot make their life stories, let alone history ; and save the odd "white tiger" which is born "only once in a generation"(*WT* 35), it is the socio-historical processes that make the individual, even entrapping him in discriminatory systems of power that offer no escape.

The emphasis on economic determinism recalls Emile Zola's naturalist novels but, as opposed to Zola, Adiga, working in the Indian context of caste, is careful to point out that the genetic determinism peculiar to the caste system (one is born into a caste or *varna*, a way of life that one cannot change) can be transcended by the entrepreneurial spirit. He even has Balram talk of being a "social entrepreneur" before becoming a "business entrepreneur".

(*WT* 299) The stress on socio-economic power systems also gives the novel a Marxian thrust but Adiga, while sympathetic towards the Indian proletariat, does not indulge in Dickensian sentimentalism which characterizes novels of Mulk Raj Anand such as *Coolie* and *The Untouchable*. On the contrary, *The White Tiger* is marked by a Machiavellian cynicism. Adiga's Balram soon realizes that servility, loyalty and honesty will only bring more suffering, and therefore gradually turns to an amoral philosophy of lies, deceit and finally murder, as a means to liberate himself from his role as a servant.

Unlike most postcolonial writers, Adiga traces the source of his protagonist's problems not to the arrival of the British, but much earlier, going as far back as Vedic antiquity. This is evident in his ironic presentation of Hindu mythology, where he highlights its complicity in preserving a status quo which ensures that the oppressed stay oppressed. Describing a temple of Hanuman, the servant of Rama in the epic *The Ramayana*, Balram adds, "we worship him in our temples because he is the shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love and devotion." (*WT* 19) This idealization of the master-servant relationship, reinforced by mythological references and by the enumeration of the virtues of a servant, is peremptorily undercut by the ironic comment: "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) The rejection of the postcolonial paradigm that celebrates personal and political independence by interfusing them is clear. India may be free, but the majority of her population remains bound in servitude to a fractional native elite.

Adiga is also at pains to show how this servitude is woven into some of the most important Indian mythological narratives such as *The Ramayana*. Balram, for example, sees himself as driving his master Ashok and his wife, Pinky Madam "as faithfully as the servant-god Hanuman carried about his master and mistress, Ram and Sita". (46) Even the name Balram is drawn from Hindu mythology, but as the scene of the naming of Balram shows, the choice of name does not represent a postcolonial hybrid identity, as in the case of G.V. Desani's H. Hatterr[2] but rather the oppressiveness of the contemporary social system. Balram is born into a family so poor that no one has the time to name him. On the first day of school, his teacher, Krishna, who requires a name to fill in his register, arbitrarily names him Balram because "he was the sidekick of the god Krishna." (14)

Thus Balram's very name seems to condemn him to a life of servitude. Adiga's treatment of the theme of servitude is original in that it allows him to juxtapose political servitude (colonization) with social servitude (masters and servants). He counterpoints colonial servitude with the social system of servants in India that continues to exist after British rule. Thus Balram says to Jiabao:

> The British tried to make you their servants, but you never let them do it...
> I was a servant once, you see. (*WT*, 5)

The theme of servitude also allows Adiga to turn the postcolonial critique of the colonial master on its head by focussing on the disparities between the new native master and his servant. Balram's relationship with his master Ashok, the son of one of the most powerful landlords in his village, is complex. It begins with servility, moves towards identification and imitation, and finally ends with a reversal of roles as the servant gradually becomes the

2. Hatter informs us: "I assumed the style-name H. Hatterr ('*H*') for the nom de plume '*Hindustaaniwalla*', and 'Hatter', the nom de guerre inspired by Rev the Head's too-large-for-him hat". (Desani 32-33). Here the cultural hybridity is reflected not only in his hybrid origins but also in the intertextual reference to the character of the Mad Hatter in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*.

master. As pointed out earlier, Balram practically worships Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam. Yet, it is evident that Balram's feelings vis-à-vis his role as a devoted driver and servant are ambivalent. The following chiasmus makes this manifestly clear: "Do we loathe our masters behind a façade of love, or do we love them behind a façade of loathing?" (187) This ambivalence comes increasingly to the surface as Balram's blind adoration of his master tends towards identification. Thus when Ashok orders Balram to drive him round Delhi at night in order to pick up women, the master's sexual arousal affects the driver as well. Thus "master and driver had somehow become one body that night." (*WT* 199) As both of them leer at a buxom woman crossing the street, Balram glances into the rear view mirror and their lustful gazes meet:

> We had caught each other out.
> This little rectangular mirror inside the car ... when master and driver find each other's eyes in this mirror, it swings like a door into a changing room, and the two have suddenly caught each other naked? (WT 199)

The trope of the mirror does in fact swing "like a door into a changing room", enabling Balram to follow what is happening at the back of the car – be it Ashok's sexual adventures or shady deals struck with politicians. The mirror literally becomes a leveller, a point of entry into a "changing room" (*WT* 199) when Balram sees his master withdrawing a huge sum of cash and decides to murder him for the money. He later uses the cash as capital to become an entrepreneur in Bangalore. Thus, while the mirror does bring master and servant into a relationship of reflection, it is no longer a spectral trope of an unbridgeable distance, as is the case in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*. Here the unnamed Indian narrator sees himself as constantly inferior to the English character, Nick Price : "Nick Price… became a spectral presence beside me in my looking glass ; growing with me, but always bigger and better – and in some way more desirable" (50). Ashok is always "more desirable" in Balram's eyes, but once Balram murders him, the servant appropriates the privileges of the master with astonishing ease.

Balram's murdering of his master is in fact the final and irrevocable reversal of the master-servant relationship. Symbolically, Balram becomes the owner and Ashok, the owned:

> Here's a strange fact: murder a man, and you feel responsible for his life, possessive even. You know more about him than his father and mother ; they know his foetus, but you know his corpse. Only you can complete the story of his life ... I am (in a sense) his master. (WT 47)

The metaphoric emphasis on writing as a "symbolic" form of power in the novel is thus not unrelated to the postcolonial celebration of writing as a means of acquiring a certain mastery over the colonial master narratives.

Another means for the subaltern to achieve a kind of mastery over the master is to inscribe subversion in servitude. This paradox can be easily discerned in Balram's personality, which is marked by conflicting impulses of in-grained servility and enterprising zeal. Yet even his servility is of a sly, self-serving kind since "My country is the kind where it pays to play it both ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, sly and sincere." (*WT* 9) Thus, in order to get himself hired as a driver by the landlord, Stork, he resorts to outrageous flattery and manipulative boot-licking, putting up a "performance of wails and kisses", declaring, "people say, 'Our father is gone, Thakur Ramdev is gone, the best of the landlords is gone, who will protect us now?' The Stork enjoyed hearing that." (*WT* 61)

Balram's behaviour—"sly and sincere" recalls Homi Bhabha's notions of "sly civility" and "mimicry" (Bhabha, 141, 122 respectively) based on an "ironic compromise" between catering to the master's expectations and affirming one's own autonomy, or in other words, between "resemblance and menace" (123). For Bhabha, the imperfect imitation of the colonizer by the colonial subject represents a veritable act of "civil disobedience", of "spectacular resistance" (172). Yet such Bhabhian paradoxes, (imitation, in this case, not being the best form of flattery) do not seem to hold water in the neo-colonial context where authority cannot be challenged through sly mimicry (in the Bhabhian sense of "the same but not quite") but through direct rebellion. The "sly civility" of the postcolonial subject thus seems to have given way to the "sly servility" of the neo-colonial subject. Balram's grovelling, however hypocritical, can only get him to a certain point in the social ladder. To truly "free" himself, he must resort to robbery and murder.

Yet, till the end, Balram is prey to conflicting allegiances to his master and his own sense of self. When he contemplates killing Ashok, he experiences the Faustian dilemma of resisting or ceding to evil. This is presented through a dichotomy reminiscent of a psychomachia, an allegorical combat between vice and virtue, projected on puddles of spit. In fact, this is an illustrative example of Adiga's systematic use of the grotesque as a means of ironic deflation. Here the trope becomes a powerful critique of a discriminatory society which forces its members to resort to unethical means. Balram's moral dilemma is exteriorized not through divine figures of the angel and devil presenting different courses on action, as in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, for example, but through the grotesque leitmotif of spit. The medieval "war of the soul" characteristic of the psychomachia is thus transposed onto the contemporary Indian context where expectorating is commonly practised:

> The left-hand puddle of spit seemed to say:
>
> Your father wanted you to be an honest man.
>
> Mr. Ashok does not hit you or spit on you, like people did to your father.
>
> Mr Ashok pays you well…He has been raising your salary without your even asking.

> But the right-hand puddle of spit seemed to say:
>
> Your father wanted you to be a *man.*
>
> Mr. Ashok made you take the blame when his wife killed that child on the road.
>
> This is a pittance. You live in a city. What do you save? Nothing. (246)

The ambivalence underlying the use of the trope of spit (i.e. deploying a grotesque, corporeal image to evoke a moral dilemma) characterizes other tropes as well. Perhaps the most recurrent trope in the novel is that of darkness. Whether or not the intertextual echoes are intended on Adiga's part, the deployment of darkness as a trope to evoke a territory has specific resonances in colonial and postcolonial fiction, particularly with respect to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and VS Naipaul's *An Area of Darkness*. Both works present personal journeys into incomprehensible lands. Conrad already subverts the colonial associations between darkness, savagery and ignorance and the impenetrable

orient, evident in works such as Harriet Martineau's *Dawn Island* by having the African Other reflect back to the European colonizer the darkness in the hearts of all men. Marlowe thus ventures into the African wilderness, "to the hidden evil, to the profound darkness of its heart." (Conrad, 49)

Naipaul further blurs distinctions between the colonizer and the colonized by having the westernized postcolonial subject experience a sense of impenetrability with respect to the orient not unrelated to that of the colonizer. Modern India no longer corresponds to the India he imagined as a child: it has become "an area of darkness; something of darkness remains in those attitudes, those ways of the thinking and seeing which are no longer mine." (Naipaul, 30). In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy self-consciously parodies Conrad's through allusions to "The History House," a house once occupied by an "Englishman who had 'gone native'…Ayemenem's own Kurtz. Ayemenem's Heart of Darkness." (52) The History House symbolizes the postcolonial subject's existential estrangement, his/her ontological and epistemological crisis brought on by exposure to western culture. Roy's characters are "locked out" out of The History House "because our minds have been invaded by a war ... that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves." (53)

In *The White Tiger*, India is both an area of light and darkness. As Balram explains to Jiabao: "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map near the ocean is well-off. But the river brings darkness to India—the black river." (*WT* 14) Balram is referring to cities such as Bangalore situated along the coast of India which he contrasts with villages or the rural hinterland in general, in the north of India. Thus as opposed to Bangalore where job opportunities abound, so much so that "you… can't get enough software engineers, can't get enough sales managers", "Things are different in the Darkness" : "tens and thousands of young men sit in tea shops, … or sit in their rooms talking to a photo of a film actress. They have no job today. They know they won't get any job today." (*WT* 54) Adiga therefore seems less preoccupied with the Indian's problematic relationship with his/her colonial past than with a complex postcolonial present, one marked by economic prosperity and social privileges for a few, and, by poverty and social discrimination for the majority.

Linked to this harsh reminder of the poverty that still plagues India half a decade after independence is a forceful anti-exoticist strain. This is evident in Adiga's portrayal of the Ganges. In the novel, the most sacred of Indian rivers becomes a trope not for the glory of Indian civilization but for servitude: "the desire to be a servant had been bred into me… poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poison are poured into the Ganga." (*WT* 193) It would also be pertinent to point out that unlike exoticized representations of the Indian tiger which may be found in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* or R.K. Narayan's *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, *The White Tiger* uses the tiger not as an orientalist trope but as a neocapitalist symbol of the Indian entrepreneur. In fact, there is an abiding use of animal allegory to launch a critique of neo-colonial society. Adiga makes his purpose clear when he has Balram resume his "whole philosophy in one sentence": "Let animals live like animals; let humans live like humans." (*WT* 276) The social degradation of the masses is made clear in Balram's father's words: "My whole life I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of man… should live like a man." (*WT* 30) The novel is in fact a veritable bestiary with images of rats, dogs, pigs, buffaloes dominating the narrative.

Adiga even traces a history of caste and class in India through animal allegory. Thus, "this country, in its days of greatness" was "like a zoo" with "Everyone in his place… Goldsmiths here. Cowherds here. Landlords there." (*WT* 63) Interestingly, Balram, who belongs to the caste of sweet-makers but whose father is forced to enter the back-breaking trade of a rickshaw puller, seems to miss the "clean, well-kept zoo". He sees the order (however discriminatory) of the caste system giving way to the chaos of the caste system. Ironically, independence seems to have plunged India into a Durkheimian social anarchy, not heralding libertarian ideals but a "dog-eat-dog" ethos: " thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, on the fifteenth of August, 1947—the day the British left—and the cages had been let open ... and the jungle law replaced zoo law." (*WT* 64) The pre-independence four-varna system has not been eradicated but has mutated in the post-independence period into rich and poor, "Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies" (*WT* 14). As opposed to the celebratory dimension of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the "life of the belly", which emphasizes replenishment and renewal in motifs of ingestion and digestion, here, it is the negative, predatorial dimension of neocapitalism which is foregrounded: "only two destinies : eat – or get eaten up." (*WT* 64)

Thus underlying the euphoric narrative of Balram's rise from a poor villager to a prosperous business entrepreneur is a pervasive system of dysphoric tropes—of animals, of darkness, even of unfair gods. This tension between optimism and pessimism also finds expression in Adiga's treatment of the trope of the fragment or of the half. Balram is semi-literate or "half-baked" as his master Ashok puts it: "He can read and write, but he doesn't get what he's read. He's half-baked" (10). Yet Balram sees this incompleteness as an advantage, if one knows how to use it, for "Entrepreneurs are made from half-baked clay" (*WT* 11). On the other hand, characters like his master's wife, Pinky Madam, who finally returns to America, and Ashok, who has been schooled in America and who is therefore hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with the servants, bureaucrats and politicians of India, are in a sense "over-baked", to stretch Adiga's metaphor. They seek to replicate their life abroad in India, living in plush suburbs, frequenting recently-built malls and dining at Thank God It's Friday, but they are not street-smart, and will ultimately either retreat from India or be eliminated.

Adiga's deployment of the trope of the half is therefore rooted in a socioeconomic context, as opposed to a significant number of postcolonial literary works in which the fragment frequently becomes a marker of more cultural concerns. Cultural in-betweenness, in effect, is often celebrated in postcolonial literature as a source of hybridity and as a privileged space of resistance. G.V. Desani's H. Hatter, for instance, is "fifty-fifty of the species" (Desani 31), that is half Malay, half English; Rushdie's Saleem Sinai is half-English, half-Hindu. These are allegorical representations of westernized natives who must mediate between the colonial and native cultures. The westernized Bengalis of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Arundhati Roys' twins who adore Dickens, Shakespeare and Julie Andrews, or the diasporic characters of V.S. Naipaul, Rohinton Mistry and Jhumpa Lahiri are all fictional representations of the postcolonial "dangling man", negotiating their identity in terms of two different cultures.

Indeed characters in postcolonial fiction are more than often endowed with a hybrid "cultural capital", to employ Pierre Bourdieu's term. This is generally underscored through strategies of intertextuality—Roy's twins are voracious readers and G.V. Desani's H. Hatterr even baptizes himself by referring to Victorian literature (see footnote 1). Yet

Adiga resists the temptation to indulge in Joycean and Rushdiesque intertextual games by keeping allusions to other texts, particularly occidental works, to a bare minimum. This is, of course, in keeping with the social circumstances (semi-literacy, no access to culture) of the autodiegetic narrator. Moreover, the spare literary allusions that Adiga does employ are never gratuitous but become a textual or even a metatextual critique of neo-colonial Indian society. A pertinent example is the poignant scene where a roadside bookseller explains to Balram that he cannot read English but has memorized the titles and cover pages of the books he sells—*Harry Potter*, Khalil Gibran, Adolf Hitler, Desmond Bagley's *The Joy of Sex*. While the motley collection spanning popular culture, political history and sexual advice may point to an ironic comment on the commercialisation and reception of books, it is the irony of being an illiterate bookseller which creates pathos. In fact, even Balram, the narrator, has taught himself English and in the incipit declares that he cannot master the language.

Adiga's intertextual references also reflect Balram's limited exposure to western culture. While Adiga himself has had a multicultural upbringing, (born and brought up in India, he emigrated to Australia to continue high school, and later studied English Literature at Columbia University, New York), he makes his character, Balram turn instinctively to Indian Literature[3]. Interestingly, the poets Balram cites—Jalal-ud-Din Rumi, Mirza Ghalib, Muhammad Iqbal and "a fourth fellow… whose name I've forgotten" (*WT* 40)—are Muslims, not Hindus, a paradoxical preference in his case. As he says to Jiabao, "have you noticed that all four of the greatest poets are Muslims. And yet all the Muslims you meet are illiterate ... or looking for buildings to blow up. It's a puzzle." (40) Here, the overcoding of authorial irony is evident in Balram's ingrained sense of religious discrimination. Balram's one-sided view of Muslims as orthodox conservatives or terrorists may make the reader smile ironically, but it is in fact part of Adiga's deliberate and systematic use of structural irony, which entails the use of a naive hero or narrator whose flawed judgements the knowing reader is prompted to correct.

Despite the fact that as readers, we sometimes tend to rectify remarks made by Balram which reflect his superstitious nature or ignorance, for the most part, we have no reason to doubt the veracity of his narrative, particularly his critique of the neo-caste system (i.e. class system) and of the political system. This is largely due to Adiga's use of a first-person narrative, which generally bridges the gap between the reader and the narrating protagonist by having the reader see things through the narrator's perspective, and which also enables readers whose situation may be very different from that of Balram to identify with him. More than a first-person narrative, *The White Tiger* is, to be more precise, a form of epistolary novel, presented in the form of letters addressed by Balram to the Chinese Premier. This narrative situation is original, to say the least, in the context of Indian fiction. Indeed the choice of a non-western narratee can be seen as a liberation from the preoccupation with the former colonizer's gaze. The "dialogue" between Balram and Jiabao thus becomes, by metonymic extension, a verbal exchange between the two emerging Asian giants, an exchange in which the west figures only as an object and not a speaking subject. In fact the epistolary mode is rather unusual for Indian postcolonial literature, but in Adiga's case, it successfully serves his purpose of persuasively presenting his view of contemporary

3. Adiga's decision to avoid western intertextual references is therefore a conscious one. His grasp of the English classics is manifest on the Man Booker Prize site, where he describes his novel as "*The Duchess of Malfi* set in Delhi."

Indian society. For the epistolary mode mimics real-life letters, thus creating the illusion of authenticity and immediacy. Furthermore, the interpellation of the narratee (i.e. Jiabao) through the use of the second-person allows for the overdetermination of a different point-of-view.

It would be tempting to argue that Adiga's choice of subject, that of an Indian servant, his original redeployment of postcolonial tropes, the generic choice of the epistolary mode, and his naturalist vision of the "wretched of the earth" are, in certain respects, uncommon and do not conform to the canonical texts of Indian postcolonial literature. Yet, before attempting to locate Adiga's distinctive place in Indian fiction, I would like to underscore the fact that contemporary postcolonial literature seems to be taking many directions, and at this stage, it is difficult to pinpoint current literary trends. The multiplicity of themes and styles is evident if we take an arbitrary cross-section of recent literary works—Ghosh's ecologically-oriented novels such as *The Hungry Tide*, the preoccupation with terrorism present in Nagarkar's *Little Tin Soldier*, C.B. Divakaruni's feminist rewriting of the epic, the *Mahabharata* entitled *The Palace of Illusions*, to name only a few. Perhaps even more significant is the presence of an entire body of contemporary popular literature in English, based on the desire to present contemporary India as it really is. The fictional treatment of elements that constitute the immediate, quotidian reality of the majority of the Indian reading public – call centres in Chetan Bhagat's *One Night @ the Call Centre,* the underbelly of India in Shobha De's *Superstar India*, or, to take an example from non-fiction, Suketu Mehta's *Bombay: Maximum City*.

It is from this standpoint that one understands the stance of the novel's detractors, who accused it of being too "accessible" to win a literary prize. Yet, it may be worthwhile to remember that given the preoccupations of the novel—social injustice, political corruption—form seems to follow function and the direct style is in keeping with the novel's emphasis on social critique. Balram thus urges readers to take "anything you hear about the country" and turn it "upside down" to uncover "the truth". (*WT* 15)

It is equally important to recall that while early postcolonial literature, circa G.V. Desani and Rushdie, considered the dilemma of the Anglicized Indian, as did later diasporic writers circa Rohinton Mistry and Bharati Mukherjee, the preoccupation with social mobility has found continuous expression in more popular artistic forms including Indian cinema as well as Hindi fiction (Munshi Premchand, Harishankar Persai) and regional literatures (Mahashweta Devi, Gurdial Singh), and more recently in Dalit literature (Namdeo Dasal, Bama Faustina). Adiga's case is unique in that his use of subjects and a style closer to those found in popular forms has achieved international recognition. It is also perhaps not entirely coincidental that the success of *The White Tiger* comes at the same time as that of Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film dealing with Mumbai slums, city gangsters and call centres, based on the popular novel *Q and A* by Vikas Swarup.

All things considered, one may say that Adiga's replaces the prism of colonialism with that of neo-colonialism. This is reflected in his choice of a servant serving not Englishmen but fellow Indians, in his ironic reversal of the nationalist narrative of freedom, and in his use of tropes of light and darkness, mirrors and a human bestiary. One may thus conclude that Adiga's postcolonial "Beggar's Opera" does in certain respects mark a turning point. The gap between English and Bhasha literatures as well as high and popular fiction in English seems to be transforming into a bridge, bringing the themes, styles and points of view of different sections of Indian society into dialogue. In this sense, Adiga, for all his traditional social

realism, is in fact, in spirit, more postmodern than Rushdie or Tharoor, for his fiction breaks boundaries of class and culture not through polyphonic intertextuality but through acts of choice as a writer. While it is ironical that the drivers whose lot Adiga describes may never be able to read his novel, except in translation, their neo-colonial masters certainly will. These anglophone Indian readers will find not the hybrid reflections of themselves and India that they have come to expect from Indian postcolonial fiction, but an ironical appraisal of the contradictions and inequalities that mark the neocolonial condition.

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