
**Disrupting the Schema: Use of Bistable Illusions in The White Tiger by
Aravind Adiga**

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Abstract:

Amitava Kumar calls the novel a map of the contemporary. *The White Tiger*, the Booker Prize winning novel by Arvind Adiga, merges the stories of a man and that of a nation in a particular temporal space to create that map of the contemporary. A marginalized man, Balram, and a backward country, India, are both trying to realign themselves vis á vis the society and the world respectively. At the macro level the story is about the impact of the dilution of the socialistic moorings of the economy and its cascading effect on the social, political and cultural aspects of Indian life. At the micro level the novel tracks the life of the protagonist Balram who reshapes his destiny by unscrupulously exploiting the opportunities that make themselves available in the new economic scenario. This paper attempts to identify the stylistic clues in the text that signify the socio-economic reality that the protagonist has to struggle against and overcome.

The schema of the novel *The White Tiger* incorporates aspects of life that India has come to be defined by - its caste system, its socio-cultural complexities, and its economic polarities. In the novel a picture of contemporary India is built through characters, images and events that are both cruelly realistic and comically exaggerated. The linguistic markers, the epistolary form, the narrative bias that captures Indian life through stereotypical images and the charting of events scripted to produce the desired effect and to re-present questions raised in the West about the socio-cultural ethos of India are the highlights of Arvinda Adiga's style in this novel. It is a well known fact that Indian writers in English look for western endorsement in order to stir interest in their work at home. Therefore, aligning their work to the western perception of India is an understandably pragmatic strategy. However, the default schema embedded in the western mind due to centuries of conditioning through political and literary tools is obviously flawed and an Indian reader can easily pick out the markers that are meant to facilitate the author's global reach. This paper attempts a stylistic study of *The White Tiger* to locate a few of those schematic markers that create a bistable perception by offering scope for at least two interpretations.

In a review of *The White Tiger*, Amitava Kumar, a famed novelist from India, says that the novel is a map of the contemporary. *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, reflects its world in multiple images – taking snatches from the life of an individual, Balaram Halwai, and superimposing them on the canvas built of a social structure rent by differences created by the persisting class and caste struggle, on the one hand, and, on the other, the effects of the global socio-economic dynamics that seek to nullify these constructs by opening up avenues without discrimination. The protagonist, Balram, hailing from the badlands of Bihar, breaks the debilitating manacles of poverty and morphs into a thriving businessman and relocates to the IT hub of Bangalore thus effectively distancing himself from his past. This transformation of identity from Balram Halwai to Ashok Sharma, from a socially imposed anonymity to a self – imposed one, occurs in the course of a tale of self-discovery and self-assertion where we find a hapless man overcoming his circumstances by recognizing the opportunities and grabbing them. The character of Balram/Ashok presents the most bistable illusion in the novel. Starting as a helpless, poor, deprived individual relegated to the margins of society he claws his way to the centre employing the most demonic means, determined to shed the label of being ‘half-baked’ (11). He learns the tricks of survival from the system that has placed one group arbitrarily above the other, creating fault lines that keep social relations on the boil. His transition courses alongside other narratives that get simultaneously built up by the situations he encounters providing the ‘mini narratives’ that weave a picture of an Indian society trying to shed its age old feudal baggage which, however, keeps surfacing surreptitiously, creating patches of light and darkness in the country and challenging its progress at every step. The picture of India that the author develops often appears to endorse the schema of India embedded in the mind of the western reader. The schema, “a mental codification of experience that includes a particular organized way of perceiving cognitively and responding to a complex situation or set of stimuli” (Merriam Webster), for India built through generations of conditioning with the help of political and literary tools can be seen in frequent use in Indian literature in English. Cultural images like Krishna, Hanuman-the monkey god, Ram, practices like paan chewing, untouchability, and historical icons like Mahatma Gandhi, Gautam Buddha- though clichéd, are still exotic enough for the target western reader. Adiga, like many of the Indian novelists, uses them liberally in his work. The Indian reader, on the other hand, cannot help but notice the rather unsubtle devaluing of revered religious and cultural symbols by most authors in order to ingratiate themselves with the western reader. In the novel *The White Tiger*, Ganga, the sacred Indian river is painted as revoltingly polluted; Hanuman, the immortal being worshipped in every Hindu household, is repeatedly called a servant God; Krishna the fount of the greatest philosophic tenets is reduced to a mere driver; Balram is summarily dismissed as “a side kick of the god Krishna” (14); the Brahmin is pictured as spitting “a red jet of paan” (13) and shown as habitually corrupt; the multiplicity of gods in the Hindu religion is made a matter of mockery. The author deliberately picks elements from the elaborately constructed and forcefully sustained image of India built by the colonists. To the western

reader such a colonial vantage positions the novel at an angle that is comfortably familiar and, therefore, wins their approval. It did too, in the case of *The White Tiger*, fetching it the Booker Prize. The Indian reader, on the other hand, is likely to respond differently from the western reader. It can be said that the images used in the novel acquire a multistable aspect depending upon the vantage of the reader.

An illustration of the concept of bistable illusion is the Rubin Vase, a psychologist's tool to study the perspectival switch that takes place between seeing the vase and the two opposed faces in profile. In this figure-ground illusion both elements are equally compelling. The novel *The White Tiger* abounds in bistable illusions (Gibbons and Whiteley, 150) that keep shifting the focus of the narrative by altering the ground and figures as per the convenience of the author. Every such stimulus causes perceptual switches and the reader's response changes in tandem. In the novel the idea of India as two countries is mounted on a canvas divided into two distinct areas- "an India of Light" i.e. places bordering the ocean which brings in light and are therefore better off than the "India of Darkness" in the northern plains created by the black river "Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas...breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth" (15) which brings death, suffocates and stunts (14-15). These two images of India –of Light and of Darkness- are like the opposed profiles in the Rubin Vase creating the figure of Balram in between. They also provide perceptual frame or context for interpretational convenience. The binary of progression/regression is branded upon the two blocs represented by Bangalore and a village in Bihar in the novel. One is India on the verge of a take off and the other is India still caught in the quagmire of innumerable social divisions. Adiga hails from Karnataka. It is an accepted fact that cities in South India tend to be cleaner and life there more ordered than the chaotic existence in a state like Bihar. Adiga pours his exasperation with the conditions in the north through unflattering descriptions of places, people and their actions and the dominant attitudes of the society. But beyond the criticism there is an acceptance of the emotions that attach a person to his roots and make him see the beauty beyond the ugliness. Balram describes his home state, which is a part of the Darkness, and yet to him is "a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields..." (14). Apparently, darkness is not the nature of the land but the experiential projection of the people who have had occasional and accidental contact with the place. Amitava Kumar in his article in *The Boston Review*, accuses Adiga of knowing "next to nothing about either the love or the despair of the people he writes about". In the proliferation of images and words that create the binated picture of two Indias what might escape attention is the regret and helplessness of a person forced to leave his part of the country for an unknown destiny in the other part because of circumstances beyond his control. Adiga gets a rap on the knuckles from Kumar for belying "the emotional truths of life in Bihar".

Like the image of India in the novel, the character of Balram, the protagonist, also presents a duality that has the potential to polarize readers' perception. Once again the bistable illusion comes into play with the opposing profiles of Ashok and Balram

representing the traditional social antagonists who together create the final figure of the Ashok/Balram. Balram's life is a study in the gradual drift from the core to the final sundering from the roots. He belongs to a caste of sweetmakers, the Halwais, living in a joint family that is forced to give up its traditional occupation due to poverty. The caste affiliation holds only nominal value since the support system of the community is absent. Balram's father works as a rickshaw-puller to eke out a living. Balram becomes a driver by chance and begins a journey that gradually distances him from his origins and ends in the erasure of his past in one fell stroke of the climactic act of murder. To tell the story of Balram's life –of his journey from Balram Halwai to Ashok, the entrepreneur, the course of events is arranged in a manner that appears to justify his violent act of treachery. The exonerating circumstances for the sin of murder are elaborately built through the description of his life riddled with abject poverty, abuse and exploitation compounded by shredded familial relations. The picture of his childhood and youth, manacled by debilitating circumstances, aligns perfectly with the western perception of the condition of the people of the lower castes in the hierarchical social order in India. So the murder he commits gets socially contextualized and becomes the expression of repressed anger against centuries of exploitation. Undoubtedly, the premeditation, the elaborate preparation and the heinousness of the act point to a source much deeper and darker than personal ambition. The characters of Balram and his victim, Ashok, become symbols of the groups they represent in the endemic class conflict. The story is a usual indictment of the Indian caste system where the balance of moral turpitude weighs heavily on the side of the upper caste- represented by people like the landlords identified in the novel as different animals according to their various depravities. However, the victim/perpetrator illusion gets momentarily destabilized by the way the character of Ashok has been portrayed. His education abroad has made him comparably more liberal and considerate towards people like Balram. He seems forced to bear the cross imposed on him by the deeds of his ancestors. Hence he is undeserving of the cruelty meted out to him at the hands of Balram. However, once the Big Man, a leader belonging to a backward caste, comes into the picture the moral equations require a reset because there seems to be little difference between the roguery of the lower caste Big Man and that of the upper caste feudal family. As the story courses through the incidents of Balram's life the ideas of criminal/ innocent, victim/ villain, exploiter/ exploited become more and more perplexing. The actions of the characters are so nuanced that it is difficult to pin those labels on the characters based on their caste alone.

Marginalized communities and their condition has been a cynosure for writers everywhere and at all times. Literatures emanating from Indian languages including English have regularly projected the inherent injustice of a society that discriminates between its citizens. The issue of marginalization of people on the basis of race, gender, age, caste, faith, social groups provides a thematic link in the writings of Indian writers from all spatial and temporal spaces. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantara Sehgal, Arundhati Roy, Perumal

Murugana, Mahasweta Devi and innumerable others have used their literary works to highlight and condemn all kinds of practices that foster inequity. Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* too is a castigation of the realities that face the marginalized population of India and advocates for a level playing field for all. Balram's father is a rickshaw-puller who has dreams of freeing his son from the tentacles of poverty by educating him. The shattering of that dream is the first indication that the narrative intends to portray the struggle of the marginalized against an entrenched hostile system. It is ironic that even in this day and age the desire to get an education should be such a difficult dream to fulfil. The education that Balram's father seeks for his son comes to nothing, but the lessons of life learnt at first hand drive his transformation from a victim of circumstances to a person in complete control. The western reader is likely to see in him a marginalized individual craving for his place in the sun and might even forgive him for the sin which is his "though it were done before." (A Hymn to God the Father by John Donne). Once again bistability comes into play. The murder he commits can be seen simultaneously as a result of hubris, at the personal level, and as an act of revenge against a class at the social level.

The bistable illusion is further endorsed by the narrative technique. *The White Tiger*, structured as a series of letters written by Balram Halwai, seems to be a deliberate strategy on the part of the author to 'hand the mike', so to speak, to the hitherto voiceless group represented by the protagonist. This strategy also commits the other group, represented by Ashok Sharma, to silence by placing it at the receiving end of the protagonist's nefarious intent. Balram Halwai, from a caste of sweetmakers by birth, the son of a rickshaw-puller as a child and a thriving entrepreneur in his present fortunes, in a retrospective first-person narration, tells the story of his life through a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. The epistolary form, the remote addressee and the unlikelihood of the letters ever getting posted (surely he wouldn't use "your yellow skull" for the Premier if it were intended) make him abandon all caution and inhibition in revealing his innermost thoughts and confessing his vilest actions while at the same time exposing the innards of a rotten social ethos. The result is, in his words, 'The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian' (10), a novel that tracks the change in a person who aspires to defeat the circumstances of his life and to alter the course of his destiny. Balram is a parody of the Nietzschean 'ubermensch', the future 'hyper man' or 'over man' who chooses to rise above conventional morality to create and impose his own on the value system of a society much in need of an overhaul. The gods of the feudalistic arrangement, the landlords in the novel, have lost their locus standi on issues of morality. New political permutations have facilitated the sharing of power with the hitherto deprived classes. The implications of this restructuring have been immense. No group may now submit to a blinkered and cornered existence. Balram's life is a case in point. He has his ears to the ground and is therefore able to seize the opportunities on offer to break the stranglehold of traditional socio-cultural values and reshape his life through sheer daring and drive. Throughout the narrative there is a constant shift of focus from the actions of an

individual to those of a class that have resulted in injustices that have persisted through generations. Thousands of such stories get created, some catch the spot light others may not but the rumblings will surely to continue till reality and perception change at the ground level. Till then the schema that paints India as dominantly a land of darkness will continue to have buyers of well told tragic stories situated in the darkness rather than light.

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