



# Uncovering Re-orientalist Discourse in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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**Abstract:** The present paper through the study of narrative techniques used by Arvind Adiga seeks to uncover the reorientalism in the novel *The White Tiger*. The paper using Lisa Lau's conception of reorientalism, tries to locate it in Adiga's Novel. The paper argues that Adiga's novel can be seen as a text that caters to the requirements of the Western literary reception and marketplace, presenting India as an exotic land of heterogeneities, poverty, corruption, and in a neoliberalist decay due to the clash of the forces of globalization and traditional feudalistic society.

**Keywords:** reorientalism, Arvind Adiga, neocolonial discourse, class struggle.

## INTRODUCTION

Edward Said in his ground breaking book *Orientalism* (1978) defines Orientalism as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological impression of the Orient (2), and Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient" (24) is called an Orientalist. Orientalism can be considered "as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). It is here to be noted that the European interest in the Orient 'other' is a kind of affirmation of their own ultimate desire for the narcissistic glorification of the 'self' by setting themselves against their contrasting image. An Orientalist author is the one who indulges in the construction of the Orient and produces it 'politically' 'sociologically' 'ideologically' 'imaginatively' by writing about it, and stressing the 'brute reality' of their lives, cultures, traditions histories (5). According to Said Orientalism can be found in the writers as diverse as Aeschylus, Dante, Goethe, Karl Marx. Almost all of the liberal humanist writers could be seen perpetuating the negative images of the 'Orient.' Lisa Lau writes about the complicity of the third world writers in disseminating the dark image of their own countries:

However, even in contemporary South Asian Literature in English by South Asians, the process of Orientalism can be seen to be still occurring. The curious development over these few recent decades is that Orientalism is no longer only the relationship of the dominance and representation of the Oriental by the non-Oriental or Occidental, but that this role appears to have been taken over (in part at least) by other Orientals, namely the diasporic ones... This process of Orientalism by Orientals is what I will be terming as 'Re-Orientalism'... In Re-Orientalism, we have the curious case in which the positionality of the powerful is simultaneously that of the insider and outsider, where the representing power can be simultaneously self and other. (Lau "Re-Orientalism" 572)

Lau identifies three types of techniques through which the diasporic women writers re-orientalise. According to Lau, "one common distortion of the images constructed by diasporic South Asian women writers occurs because of the overemphasis on being South Asian, and the almost rigid depiction of adherence of fictional South Asian characters to traditional Ideals associated with South Asia" (582). It includes an attempt to incorporate typical South Asian diegetic structure, narratives and character types in their writings. The second re-orientalising technique is "the inclination to generalise with totalisations, sweeping statements appearing more the norm than the exception" (584). This kind of 'skewed' or misleading information leads to the creation of stereotypes or generalized notions of the Orient and the Orientals, it involves a denunciation of the native culture, rituals, traditions and practices and a corresponding hankering after the European ideals of liberal democracy and egalitarianism. The third type of the strategy is the "blurring of boundaries between fiction and autobiography" (585). It involves truth claims of writers that they use to assign authenticity to their texts. All these three elements can be found in Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

Aravind Adiga, writer of the Man Booker Prize winner novel *The White Tiger* (2008), was born in Madras, India. Educated in Mangalore and later in Sydney, Australia, Adiga graduated from Columbia University and worked as a journalist for the *Times* from 2003 to 2005. At the age of 33, he is among the youngest writers to win the highly coveted prize among literary writers. Adiga is the fourth Indian-born novelist to win the award, the others being Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai.

### **Reorientalist Narratorial Strategies**

The novel makes use of epistolary form in a first person narration that often seems highly unreliable and full of eccentricities. The narrator, highly boastful of himself assumes himself to be the white tiger among the crowd of imbeciles and crooks. But he actually is not all that what he pretends to be, killing his master who was good to him and being the reason for the collective death of his entire family for a petty sum of money. The structure of the novel is very close to that of a bildungsroman or what is called the developmental novel in which the main emphasis of the narrative is to throw lights on the various stages in the life of the protagonist. This protagonist in *The White Tiger*, however, can be seen as a picaro, who is narcissistic, selfish, but having pretensions of a revolutionary.

The major narrative techniques that Adiga makes use of in the novel to reorientalise India are irony, satire and humour which also account for the commercial and popular appeal of the novel. Adiga is highly ironic when he says that it is the yellow and the brown men who are going to dominate the world, and he lavishes praise on China for a country with an immense love of freedom and liberty. Balram writes that he has read about the greatness of Chinese people and their love of freedom and liberty in a book bought from a second-hand book market in Old Delhi named *Exciting Tales of the Exotic East*. In a language that is highly ironic and full of racial and national prejudices, Balram affirms, “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, cell phone usage, and drug abuse” (5). Balram calls himself one of the Premiere’s kind and explains to him, “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” (4).

Adiga’s portrayal of Indian culture and rituals is highly ironic and humorous. Balram wants to start his story with an invocation as it is the tradition in the country, he states, “I too should start off by kissing some god’s arse. Which god’s arse though? There are so many choices. See, the Muslims have one god. The Christians have three gods. And we the Hindus have 36, 000, 000 gods. Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divine arses for me to choose from” (8). The tone reaches the height of black humor when Balram satirizes the death rites of cremation Balram’s story ridicules the Indian customs, rituals, tradition; everything from theology to scatology is ridiculed and satirised. The description of the funeral of Balram’s mother unveils the futility and hypocrisy of the death rites of cremation; Balram describes, “My mother’s body had been wrapped from head to toe in a saffron silk cloth, which was covered in rose petals and jasmine garlands. I don’t think she had ever had such a fine thing to wear in her life. (Her death was so grand that I knew, all at once, that her life must have been miserable)” (16).

Balram writes that India comprises of two countries, “an India of Light, and an India of Darkness” (14). The parts of the country that are nearer to the sea are economically well developed while the interior of the country is backward and an area of darkness. He tells the Premiere about the dirt and pollution in the country; he speaks of the holy river Ganga, “...river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth... No!—Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids” (15).

Continuing his satire on religion Adiga says that Hanuman is the favourite god of Indian masses, “Do you know about Hanuman, sir?...we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion. These are the kinds of gods they have foisted on us...how hard it is for a man to win his freedom in India (19). Indian men are portrayed as half-baked, Indian children undernourished and unhealthy, Indian women quarrelling and unclean. Balram’s description of Indian women is stereotypical; “My aunts and cousins and Kusum, my granny. One of them

preparing the meal for the buffalo; one winnowing rice; one squatting down, looking through the scalp of another woman, squeezing the ticks to death between her fingers.” (21)

### **Portrayal of India as an Exotic Land: Denunciation of the Native Culture, Rituals, Traditions and Practices**

The novel *The White Tiger* is full of Generalisations, sensational or stereotypical descriptions of India. The novel *The White Tiger* narrates the story of a simple villager from Bihar. Balram, alias Munna was born in a remote village in Laxmangarh, Bihar. Adiga's novel exploits the exoticized image of India. The novel *The White Tiger* is an epistolary narrative in the form of eight chapters each standing for a different letter addressed to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, who according to a news of All India Radio is coming to India and will be visiting the Silicon Valley to know more about the Entrepreneurship in India. The text of the novel harshly derides not only Hindu culture and traditions but contains stereotypical descriptions of Muslims as well ; “Have you noticed that all four of the greatest poets in the world are Muslim? And yet all the Muslims you meet are illiterate or covered head to toe in black burkas or looking for buildings to blow up” (40). Adiga's view is similar to that of the Occident writers and theorists who believed in the inferiority of the Oriental experience. It was Hegel who opined in his *The Philosophy of History* that Indians have no political or material accomplishments, the only history they have is the history of being vanquished (159). Similarly Adiga opines;

“The Black Fort...The Turks, or the Afghans, or the English, or whichever foreigners were then ruling India, must have built the fort centuries ago. (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 that we became free then.) Now the foreigners have long abandoned the Black Fort, and a tribe of monkeys occupy it” (22).

The reader can easily note the pun in the lines and relate the Black Fort with the Red Fort of India, and the tribe of monkeys as the politicians. The novel is told from the point of view of Balram, a poor driver, who has seen miseries of poverty in his life. He gives voice to the millions of ordinary men in India who can not afford two square meals a day even after the back-breaking toil. Balram's father, a rickshaw puller, has been treated like a donkey all his life. Speaking about his father, Balram throws light on the life of a rickshaw puller in India, he says, “My father's spine was a knotted rope, the kind that women use in villages to pull water from wells; the clavicle curved around his neck in high relief, like a dog's collar; cuts and nicks and scars, like little whip marks in his flesh” (26). Balram, in his school, was different from his other classmates, once a school inspector praised him, “You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation?” Balram replies, “The white tiger” (35). The inspector gifted him a book about the life of Mahatma Gandhi and recommended a scholarship for him. However, he soon has to leave his school to work in a tea shop to pay for the debt that the family has incurred due to the grand wedding of a cousin sister. As a child, he works, and his education starts at the tea shop where he observes and eavesdrops

different kinds of people. After his father's death who died of Tuberculosis, Balram comes to Dhanbad. According to Balram, every good turns into worse in the darkness, its full of heat and dust, without even the basic amenities of life; "there is no hospital in Laxmangarh, although there are three different foundation stones for a hospital, laid by three different politicians before three different elections (47). The scene of the hospital across the river without a single doctor is horrifying, "the line of diseased eyes, raw wounds, and delirious mouths kept growing" (49).

According to the Booker Prize Foundation, "The White Tiger is a tale of two Indias. Balram's journey from the darkness of village life to the light of entrepreneurial success is utterly amoral, brilliantly irreverent, deeply endearing and altogether unforgettable" (The White Tiger). Adiga believes that two kinds of people live side by side in India, some people waste in affluence, and some people starve in poverty and destitution. Even after the sixty-seventy years of independence, the gap between the rich and poor is widening to unimaginable limits. The white colonial domination of the poor has been replaced by the local power hungry politicians. Balram tells us, "On the fifteenth of August, 1947- the day the British left- the cages had been let open; and the animals had attacked and ripped each other apart and jungle law replaced zoo law" (64). And India, "in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo. Everyone in its place, everyone happy" (63). It is important to note here that the imperialistic regimes portray the colonized space as a dark mysterious place, and the natives of such a place as uncivilized, irrational, exotic beings, socio-culturally at the lower level of the ladder of evolution that require colonizer's interception so that they can be taken from darkness to the light. India attained freedom from the British colonial regime in 1947, and this marks the birth of a new postcolonial nation-state that is deemed as secular, socialist, democratic republic. However, the rule of British colonizers has been replaced by the rule of the neo-colonial elites. Moreover, common man can do nothing except discussing or fighting over the elections every five years. Balram writes to the Premiere, "These are the three main diseases of this country, sir: typhoid, cholera, and election fever. This last one is the worst; it makes people talk and talk about things that they have no say...like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra" (98). In the contemporary India Adiga comments on the two ways out of this state of the jungle, which is through crime or politics, "eat –or get eaten up" (64). *The Economist* satirizes Adiga as "the Charles Dickens of the call-centre generation." According to David Sexton, who writes for *The Evening Standard*, the prose of Adiga is a "scathing, abusively satirical antidote to the romance of Rushdie." Boyd Tokin opines, "Adiga could be classified as the anti-Rushdie, cleaning florid exotica from the fiction of India."

Balram the Anti-hero narrator, is a megalomaniac driver who thinks himself as the white tiger among the crowd of fools. Corruption is one of the major themes of the novel; Adiga portrays corruption as an integral part of Indian society indispensable for the survival and rise of an individual. The main character justifies and makes use of hook or crook to succeed in life. Balram considers himself above the social norms and morality of ordinary human beings, he must assert himself to survive in the world of 'darkness.' Adiga writes about the dark side of India, about its physical filth and moral corruption exposing the hollowness of

political leaders and slogans of 'India shining' claiming India to be among world powers when vast inequalities and injustices exist in every nook and corner of the country.

### Adiga's Pretensions of Authenticity

Adiga is accused of inauthenticity in the portrayal of Balram Halwai Ventriloquising underclass. Adiga an Indian diasporic writer from Mumbai, well educated in India and abroad, a Graduate from Columbia University, a correspondent for Times speaks from the perspective of a school drop out of Laxmangarh in Bihar, son of a rickshaw-puller, working in a tea shop and later as a chauffeur. Adiga is criticized for his lack of the first-hand experience of the lives of the 'others' and the 'Indianness' which is assigned to the novel by describing it a picture of 'real' India. Amitava Kumar in his review of the novel in *The Hindu* opines, "For a novel that is supposed to be a portrait of the 'real' India, *The White Tiger* comes across as curiously inauthentic. Is it a novel from one more outsider, presenting cynical anthropologies to an audience that is not Indian?"

In an interview, Adiga says that the novel is an "attempt to catch the voice of men you meet as you travel through India-the voice of the colossal underclass." (Interview, Free Press Journal, 2008). Balram calls his story "The Autobiography of a Half Baked Indian" and goes on to say that India is full of the half-baked men like him because they never have the opportunity to go to school, and these half-baked men have the responsibility of Indian democracy. According to Ana Christina Mendes, "Adiga's work offers a purportedly long-awaited creative departure from Rushdie's; on the other hand, that the characterization strategies followed by Adiga result in what critics have perceived as class ventriloquism" ("Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India" 275). Adiga assumes the role of a committed literary writer who likes to hit hard at every foible or moral weakness; he thinks that it is the duty of an artist to work for the betterment of the society. In an interview with Stuart Jeffries Adiga opines:

At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do - it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination.

Nowadays India is facing a number of problems, the political and moral corruption in society, the caste conflict, the rich-poor divide, religious fanaticism, lack of proper sanitation and health facilities. In *The White Tiger* Adiga describes two Indias, the areas near the sea and the areas of central India. The former areas are economically advanced and developed while the latter ones are untouched by the modernistic amenities and inventions. The former is known as the India of 'light' while the latter one as 'darkness.' This 'darkness' is represented by the central parts of India like Laxmangarh, a place where "Electricity poles—defunct. Water tap—broken. Children—too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like the guilty conscience of the government of India" (20).

Adiga cites *The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison as a primary source of inspiration that deals with the issues of racism and class struggle in America. Similarly, Adiga talks about the issues of casteism and class in Indian society. The novel documents the master-servant relationship in the rural and urban India. Balram, the son of a rickshaw puller, becomes a driver after washing utensils and breaking coal at a tea shop. As a driver, he works in the kitchen of the family, washes feet and massages, he is the one who takes care of the dogs. However, he gets only a small part as a return for the service he does to the family. According to Balram servants in India live a life of eternal slavery, he uses the metaphor of a rooster coop to describe India's condition:

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space...The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop.

When Pinky Madam hit somebody on the road and killed him, Ashok and his family force Balram to bear the blame of the accident by signing an affidavit. Balram tells us that the “The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse. Yes, that's right: we all live in the world's greatest democracy” (169). Balram ascribes the entire fault on the Indian family system that the servants are unable to come out of the rooster coop, because they do not want their families to be persecuted once they revolt against their masters. Balram himself is sure what would have happened to his family once he has slit his master's throat. Balram further indicts the fanciful idea of democracy as a government of the people, for the people and by the people because it is under the disguise of democracy that the politicians can befool the masses. It is only the sincerity of Indian servants that the entire economic system of India is dependent;

Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr. Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent—as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way—to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (175-176)

Adiga's conception of history is very close to what may be called the dialectical materialist conception of history; “The history of the world is the history of a ten-thousand-year war of brains between the rich and the poor...The poor win a few battles (the peeing in the potted plants, the kicking of the pet dogs, etc.) but of course the rich have won the war for ten thousand years” (254). In this struggle, the rich makes use of all kinds of tricks and unethical practices like bribing, lynching the honest people. Balram justifies his killing of Ashok by saying that the tax evasion he manages by bribing the politicians is actually the money of the poor

like him because ultimately the money is used for the public so by stealing his money he is doing nothing wrong. Here Balram considers himself like Raskolnikov of *The Crime and the Punishment* who considers himself a Nietzschean *Urbemensch* and murders the old woman who takes high-interest rates from the poor. However, Balram is no idealist he is purely nihilistic and selfish because he risks his own family for the purpose. Balram does not support armed rebellion to eradicate the inequalities in India; he says, “To hell with the Naxals and their guns shipped from China. If you taught every poor boy how to paint, that would be the end of the rich in India” (275). India today is characterized by the co-existence of various heterogeneities like the economic growth on the one hand, and the increase in the poor rich differences. The portrayal of the Silicon Valley, Bangalore, symbolic of India’s technological and economic prowess is crudely realistic, “men and women in Bangalore live like the animals in a forest do. Sleep in the day and then work all night, until two, three, four, five...their masters are on the other side of the world, in America... The girls would not be safe...The men of this city, frankly speaking, are animals” (298).

### Concluding

### Remarks

The reception of *The White Tiger* has been full of ambivalence; some critics take it as an eye-opening novel exposing the malignant evils of Indian society while others take it as an inauthentic portrayal of “Indianness” and distortion of reality to meet the requirements of the western literary marketplace. In a way it can be taken to be a continuum of Rushdie’s Post-Emergency India in *Midnight’s children*. A part of re-orientalist discourses that represent India as a land of snake charmers, superstitious people, starved beggars, criminals, dirt and disease where people fight and cut each other’s throat in the name of caste or religion, where people live without the basic perquisites for a good life. Balram in the novel writes, “Delhi is a city where civilization can appear and disappear within five minutes. On either side of us right now there was just wilderness and rubbish” (281). Adiga’s novel can be seen in relation to Graham Huggan’s conception of *The Postcolonial Exotic*. Huggan sees the postcolonial literature as exploiting the craving of the western audiences for the consumption of the romantic, exotic, dark, mysterious portrayals of the East and sees it essentially as a kind of literary touristic voyeurism. Somak Ghoshal points out Adiga’s intentions of his novel being a source text for a Hollywood film. In 2012, Todd Field was assigned the job of writing a screenplay for the movie by director John Hart for Smuggler Films. On the other hand, a contrapuntal reading of the text (a methodology developed by Said) can be helpful in seeing the actual cause behind this kind of extreme poverty and help in the subversion of the West. According to Adiga, “Three hundred years ago New Delhi was the most important city on earth under the moguls.” The above cited argument implicitly affirms that the present day condition of poverty, illiteracy, hunger and destitution is the result of the intervening period of British colonialism.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



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