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Nietzschean Overtones in Adiga's *The White Tiger*: A Critique

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Abstract:

The awakening of new master morality consciousness in a modern slave is the beginning of subaltern assertion in all walks of mainstream society in India. This new realization provides a level playing field to subalterns, which shows how their tit-for-tat spirit helps them to actualize their dream of becoming a master in society. To become a master of his own destiny, Arvind Adiga's protagonist uses a Nietzschean "will to power" approach. In Adiga's novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), it could be found that the hegemonic social structure always helps masters to control and maintain their exploitative social setup, Adiga calls it - "the rooster coop", in which all subservient slaves are trapped. This trap allows masters to implicate extreme pain in the lives of the oppressed and use their slaves as objects. The rise of a new master from such a coop is only possible if the effects of slave morality in the oppressed decline and they develop the will-to-power spirit in their lives. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) is a German iconoclast who shook the traditional conformist thinking with his popular statement- "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him" to make a way to develop the full potential of a human being through his concept of "Overman" and the "Will to Power". The overtones of Nietzsche's concept of "Overman" and "the Will to Power" could be traced in the life journey of Adiga's protagonist Balram Halwai and his rise from rags to riches. The paper examines the implications of Nietzschean moralistic ideas in Adiga's novel and presents the new avatar of Nietzsche's Overman in Balram Halwai and in his aspiration to become a successful entrepreneur.

Keywords: Morality, Hegemony, Power, Master and Slave, Individualism, Freedom, Classism, etc.

Introduction:

Indian Literature in the past presented singular or one-sided stories mainly from the masters' perspective. The space for "others" or subalterns in Indian fiction was shrunk as the writers engaged themselves in upholding the trendy issues of their powerful masters. However, the progressive writers in post-independent times tried to redefine the aesthetic standards of literature by writing about the commoners. The writings of modern progressive writers like Mulraj Anand, Gopinath Mohanty, Arundhati Roy, V. S. Naipaul, Arvind Adiga, and others depicted the changing mood of modern times in their writings. These writers came down heavily on the evil practices in the society that go against the constitutional ethos of free India.

The Indian Society has a hierarchical structure, constituted on the basis the religious norms of the *caste system*. In his novel, *The White Tiger (TWT) (2008)*, Arvind Adiga (1974-) explores the effects of obsolete moral values of the Indian social structure on the lives of common people. In a hegemonic society, people internalize cultural values, attitudes, moral behaviour, shared norms, customs, and traditional moral values. The upper caste people or upper-class landlords, who have access to the hegemonic power structure in Indian society, exercise their complete control over all social resources and activities of poor subalterns. These poor people feel trapped in a coop or prison like social situations and destined to serve their powerful masters meekly as they do not have the courage to protest against their masters. Arvind Adiga uses a metaphor - “Rooster Coop” for this social servitude in which men and women dutifully serve their masters according to social and religious norms. These subaltern people are mentally conditioned to stay in this social set-up and are condemned to suffer eternally as they are terrified to find any escape route to come out of social slavery.

In post-globalized India, the masters have devised their crooked ways to stay in power using human and non-human sources and breaching all legal and moral norms either by using muscle power or bribing the political administration. The masters in Adiga’s novel have their own morality. Calling the Indian Society - “a kind of jungle”, Adiga presents a realistic picture of Indian society in which only the powerful people continue to succeed or survive, while the submissive slaves fail or perish. Friedrich Nietzsche’s protagonist Zarathustra in his philosophical masterpiece- *Thus Spoke Zarathustra (TSZ) (published between 1883 and 1885)* hints at a similar moralistic situation by proclaiming- “God is dead; he hath died of his pity for men.” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, 125). In his provocative argument, Nietzsche criticised and rejected Christian morality calling it a slave and life-denying morality. Unfortunately Adiga’s metaphor - “Rooster Coop” stands for a similar slave morality that prepares poor men and women for their final slaughter at the hands of their masters. Against this social backdrop, Adiga calls for the appearance of “The White Tiger” to escape from the class and caste slavery. In a similar way, Nietzsche came up with his idea of “Übermensch” which means “Overman” to counter this slave morality:

I teach you the over man, Man is something that shall be overcome. What have you done to overcome him? All beings so far have created something beyond themselves, and do you want to be the ebb of this great flood and even go back to the beasts rather than overcome man? What is the ape to man? A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment. And man shall be just that for the over man: A laughing stock or a painful embarrassment... Behold, I teach you the Over man. The Over man is the Meaning of the Earth. (*TSZ* 5)

Nietzsche’s metaphor of “Overman”, which is also known as a “Übermensch”, is used for a human being who believes in self-mastery overcoming all human limitations which allows him or her to be critical of himself or herself and others. This stage of human evolution helps the voiceless poor people to develop their individualistic values to be more and more powerful, exploring their creative capacities to build a better future while allowing every individual to achieve his or her true potential. According to Nietzsche, an Overman is the highest stage of human evolution. Humans are presented as a bridge between animals and overman. In the absence of God, they need to face worldly challenges and attain the highest stage of evolution. Adiga’s symbolic title, “The White Tiger” has a close relationship with Nietzsche’s metaphor, “Übermensch” (Overman). The protagonist Balram Halwai is a member of the oppressed slave group, but he is determined to rise and assume the master’s place setting his own moral standards. He understands all the crooked ways of his master, Ashok who indulges in bribing the government officials to set up his business ventures. Following the footsteps of his master, Balram also develops his strong urge to break the age-old traditional norms of social stratification and liberate himself from the social prison such as the exploitative family system and caste or class slavery.

The Nietzschean idea of the “Will to Power” is derived from the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s idea of “The World as Will and Representation”. Nietzsche’s early works, such as *Human, All Too Human*, and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* contain seeds of the “will to power” concept, although it was not explicitly articulated at this stage. Nietzsche calls it a biological urge that is present in all living beings:

Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power; and even in the will of the serving I found the will to be master. The weaker is persuaded by its own will to serve the stronger, because it wants to be master over what is still weaker: this is the only pleasure it is incapable of renouncing. And as the smaller gives way to the greater, in order for it to have its pleasure and power over the smallest, so too the greatest gives way, and for the sake of power it risks – life itself. That is the giving-way of the greatest, that it is a risk and a danger and a tossing of dice unto death. (TSZ, 89)

Gaining access to power requires one to behave like a powerful person. Nietzsche rejected traditional morality and advocated for a morality based on individual will to power. He believed that individuals should strive to overcome their limitations and become a “supermen”, who create their own values and live life on their own terms. Applying a Nietzschean moral compass to “The White Tiger,” one can analyse Balram’s actions and decisions in the context of this philosophy.

Balram’s journey can be seen as a manifestation of Nietzsche’s ideas of self-exaltation. He starts out as a powerless servant who is trapped in the social hierarchy of India, but he eventually finds a way to break free and assert his will to power. He becomes a successful businessman by breaking the laws and exploiting others, which aligns with Nietzsche’s rejection of conventional morality. Balram sees himself as a “White Tiger,” a rare and powerful creature that can only survive by dominating others. This belief reflects Nietzsche’s emphasis on individualism and the pursuit of power. During his childhood, a school inspector used the title, “White Tiger” for Balram for his inquisitive understanding and reading proficiency. But later on, the life situations force him to work at a tea shop and make him do a job of coal breaking. To escape from this early struggle of life, Balram decides to learn car driving and make his career at Dhanbad. After realizing that marriage is a kind of bondage and family is a trap, Balram decides to leave his village for a town where he starts working at Ramdev Thakur’s bungalow as a second driver. Determined to get promoted to the position of the first driver, he exposes Ram Persad’s real Muslim identity and becomes the primary driver. His gradual ascent in his life from a poor village boy to the primary driver of his second master, Ashok, and his biological drive to become more and more powerful manifests Nietzsche’s concept of the will to power:

To be sure, you call it will to beget or drive to a purpose, to something higher, more distant, more manifold: but all this is one, and one secret. I would rather perish than renounce this one thing; and truly, wherever there is decline and the falling of leaves, behold, there life sacrifices itself – for power. (TSZ 89)

Balram is determined to assert his dominance and rise above the poverty and oppression of his upbringing. He believes that he can achieve this by becoming a “White Tiger” - someone who is rare and powerful, and stands out from the rest of society. Balram’s drive to succeed at any cost reflects Nietzsche’s belief that the will to power is the driving force behind human action.

Critique of Traditional Morality:

Another Nietzschean idea that is evident in the novel is the rejection of traditional morality. Nietzsche believed that traditional morality was a constraint on human potential and that individuals should create their own values based on their unique experiences and desires. He is particularly critical of Christian morality, which he sees as promoting otherworldly values that devalue life experiences on Earth. He accuses Christianity of fostering a culture of guilt, denial of instincts, and self-denigration, which he believes hinders human potential. He further suggests that the "will to power" – the desire to assert one's influence and dominate others – is a fundamental driving force in human behaviour. According to Nietzsche, traditional morality suppresses this natural impulse and restrains unprivileged individuals from realizing their true potential:

What is the price of moral improvement?— Unhinging of reason, reduction of all motives to fear and hope (punishment and reward) dependence upon a priestly guardianship, upon pedantic formalities which claim to express a divine will; the implanting of a "conscience" which sets a false knowing in place of testing and experiment: as if what should be done and what left undone had already been determined—a kind of castration of the seeking and forward-striving spirit; the worst mutilation of man that can be imagined presented as the "good man." (*The Will to Power* 91)

Balram manifests this rejection of traditional morality, as he is willing to do whatever it takes to achieve his goals, even if it means betraying those closest to him. He rejects the idea that morality should be dictated by society or religion and instead creates his own values based on his experiences and desires. Like Nietzsche, through Balram, who rises from poverty to become a successful entrepreneur by adopting ruthless methods, Adiga seems to be using his protagonist's journey to challenge and critique various aspects of traditional morality in Indian society.

The confession affidavit that Balram is forced to give in writing to take the blame for a hit-and-run case for Pinky Madam disappoints him: "These masters still own us, body, soul, and arse." (*TWT* 170). Being fully awakened, after this, he starts using immoral ways to get some extra money from his master. He submits false overcharged car maintenance bills and uses his master's car to offer paid rides to people during his free time. He feels truly awakened to be able to find a way to his liberation from the rooster's coup: "I have woken up, and the rest of you are still sleeping, and that is the only difference between us" (*TWT* 315). His claim: "It was either me or him," indicates that his own survival is more important than any moral code (*TWT* 276). Considering himself fully aware of his servitude, he finally kills his master, Ashok justifying that this murder will make him feel worthwhile: "All I wanted was the chance to be a man –and for that, one murder was enough (*TWT* 315)." He breaks all set moral rules to establish his individuality to be a free man without feeling any remorse for his act. Christian Emden rightly mentions in his article on "Nietzsche's Will to Power: Biology, Naturalism, and Normativity": "Their better conscience is a consequence of the fact that they can happily dispense with a notion of justice that does not reflect the complex motivations of human agency and that, as a result, instills an experience of resentment that invariably leads to violence". (51) Adiga's portrayal of the caste system highlights the inherent injustice and discrimination it perpetuates. Balram's lower caste status subjects him to a life of servitude and exploitation showing how traditional morality is used to justify social inequality. But, Balram, instead of following the traditional occupation of his caste, dares to learn car-driving and goes on to become an entrepreneur.

Balram's journey can be seen as a manifestation of Nietzsche's ideas. He starts out as a powerless servant who is trapped in the social hierarchy of India, but he eventually finds a way to break free and assert his will to power. He becomes a successful businessman by breaking the law and exploiting others, which aligns with Nietzsche's rejection of conventional morality. Balram sees himself as a "White Tiger," a rare and powerful creature that can only survive by dominating others. This belief reflects Nietzsche's emphasis on individualism

and the pursuit of power. However, there are also aspects of Balram's character that contradict Nietzsche's philosophy. Balram is not a "superman" in the traditional sense; he does not create his own values or live a life of complete independence. Instead, he is still heavily influenced by the social structures of India and the expectations placed upon him by his family and culture. He also experiences guilt and moral conflict, which suggests that he is not completely free from traditional morality.

In conclusion, applying a Nietzschean moral compass to "The White Tiger" reveals a complex interplay between individualism and tradition. Balram's actions and decisions can be seen as a manifestation of Nietzsche's ideas, but they are also shaped by the cultural and social context in which he lives. Ultimately, the novel raises important questions about the validity of traditional morality and the pursuit of power in the modern world.

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