

## The Poetics and Politics of Cultural Studies in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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### Abstract

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) can easily be placed in the gamut of Cultural Studies since it shares most of the features of this school. For example, it can easily be analysed as a form of cultural resistance to homogenising capitalism, as the emphasis throughout is on the particularities of the proletariat suppressed under the dominant high culture. But what strikes one as odd is that this particular class has been undermined in the text to such an extent that the writer not only fails to redefine the social order but also ends up as a spokesperson of the conventional Eurocentric perspective of the East to the extent that it has led literary critics to debate how far he fits a Western cosmopolitan model of writing. This paper, therefore, attempts to unravel these diametrically opposed strands in the fabric of *The White Tiger* as Adiga while silencing certain voices ends up allowing the narcissism of the Western culture raise its garrulous head.

### Abstract in Malay

*The White Tiger* (2008) oleh Aravind Adiga secara mudahnya boleh ditempatkan dalam ruang Kajian Kebudayaan kerana karya ini meliputi hampir kesemua ciri-ciri kajian tersebut. Sebagai contoh, ia boleh dianalisis sebagai satu bentuk perjuangan mempertahankan budaya terhadap kapitalisme yang bersifat mendominasi menerusi penekanan tentang proletariat yang ditindas oleh budaya tinggi yang dominan. Tetapi, apa yang pelik tentang kelas tersebut ialah bagaimana ia tidak digambarkan dengan sewajarnya hinggalah penulisnya bukan saja gagal untuk membaik pulih kedudukan sosial malah telah menjadi jurucakap bagi pandangan tradisional Barat tentang masyarakat Timur sehingga para pengkritik sastera mempersoalkan sejauh mana beliau layak sebagai model tulisan cosmopolitan Barat. Oleh yang demikian, esei ini cuba untuk merungkai hal-hal bercanggah dalam *The White Tiger* sementara Adiga membenarkan sikap narsistik budaya Barat bermaharajalela dalam menyembunyikan beberapa suara lain.

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### **Keywords**

Cultural Studies, economic exploitation, cultural ethos, Orientalist thought, counter-hegemonic culture, class conflict

### **Keywords in Malay**

Kajian Kebudayaan, eksploitasi ekonomi, asas budaya, pemikiran Orientalis, budaya anti-hegemoni, konflik kelas

The establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1960s at Birmingham University helped develop Cultural Studies as a major discipline. Cultural Studies embraces a wide array of perspectives and cannot be identified in terms of a single theoretical school. It combines literary theory, media theory, film/video studies to concentrate on the relation between cultural artifacts and matters of ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class and/or gender. Thus by sharing a commitment to interdisciplinary, social and political engagements, this particular school helps us look at literature in relation to other forms of culture and scrutinise the politics and ideology of these varied categories of culture that make contemporary culture possible. It rejects the influence of previous literary studies such as New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstructionism which in varying ways privileged the literary text to the historical and social context. Instead, it finds itself in the company of theories like Marxism, New Historicism, Postcolonialism, Feminism and Ethnic Studies – all of which deconstruct the artist's alienation from his/her social-cultural environment and point out frequently ignored coincidences between socio-political and economic events and literary themes.

T.S. Eliot's statement that art can survive in a society bereft of moral and cultural moorings only by severing links with the masses smacked of macropolitical frame of reference. Needless to say, Eliot's statement argues for the standardisation of aesthetic values framed by elite ideologies and leads to a distinction between high and mass culture. Cultural Studies dismantles this aristocratic view modulated on the opposition between disinterested, pure autonomous art and commercialised mass culture. Tearing apart this political division between the so-called high and low culture, Cultural Studies analyses cultural products like dress, fashion, popular magazines, popular music, slang, television and internet as subversive/alternative cultures as against the established/standard cultures. Undoubtedly, the increasing focus on popular/marginal cultural forms together with the disappearance of grand narratives threatens the absolute values in which intellectuals had built their ivory tower. This school of Cultural Studies labelled as British Cultural Studies also remains diametrically opposed to the theory of cultural industry developed by Frankfurt School theoreticians such as Theodor W. Adorno, Max

Horkheimen and Herbert Marcuse – all of whom treat revolution as purely utopian and the avant-garde intellectual as autonomous, segregated from the so-called zombie society. The culture industry, according to this school, would necessarily lead to passivity by trading an alliance with the system it pretends to criticise. That Cultural Studies is a set of conflicting methods and approaches being pulled in divergent directions is evident when Stuart Hall, in his essay “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” defines two approaches of Cultural Studies. One is the Culturalist where the individual is more or less to create meanings for itself and rework social institutions, and the other is the Structuralist where the individual is determined by and within social and ideological institutions (Nayar 162).

The present day concern of literary studies is to examine texts for their revelation of the economic and social realities especially as they produce ideology and represent power or subversion. Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is one such text that seems to be grounded in the specific conditions in which it is produced and received. It comes across as an embodied thought of the poetics and politics of Cultural Studies and this paper makes an attempt to highlight its ideological framework by which existing institutions and structures of power are reproduced, restricted and transformed. Since it shares most of the features of the school of Cultural studies, it can easily be analysed as a form of cultural resistance to homogenising capitalism as the emphasis throughout is on the particularities of the proletariat suppressed under the dominant high culture. But what strikes one as odd is that the proletariat is not spared by the writer. In fact, this particular class has been undermined in the text to such an extent that the writer ends up presenting a pejorative view of this class that he claims to defend. He thus not only fails to redefine the social order but also ends up as a spokesperson of the conventional Eurocentric perspective of the East. This paper, therefore, seeks to unravel these diametrically opposed strands criss-crossing the fabric of *The White Tiger* as Adiga while silencing certain voices ends up allowing the narcissism of Western culture raise its garrulous head.

Influenced by Marxist views, *The White Tiger* revolves around the conflict between social groups that contest for economic and political power in general and the social mobility of Balram Halwai within the extremes of poverty and wealth of the Indian society in particular. Adiga tells two interrelated stories: that of Balram and his ambition to become in his own words, “a big bellied man” and through Balram’s social mobility, the writer chronicles both “an India of Darkness and an India of Light,” presenting both as equally unjust and corrupt. Balram is the son of a rickshaw puller who gets his name from his teacher as he is called Munna till then:

“Munna? That’s not a real name.”

He was right: it just means “boy.”...

“Didn’t your mother name you?”  
“She’s very ill, sir. She lies in bed and spews blood. She’s got no time to name me.”  
“And your father?”  
“He’s a rickshaw-puller, sir. He’s got no time to name me.”  
“Don’t you have a granny? Aunts? Uncles?”  
“They’ve got no time either.”...  
The teacher turned aside...  
“Well, it’s up to me, then, isn’t it?”... It’ll be *Balram*. You know who Balram was, don’t you?”  
“No, sir.”  
“He was the sidekick of the god Krishna. Know what my name is?”  
“No, sir.”  
He laughed. “Krishna.” (*The White Tiger* 13, 14)

However, Balram’s intelligence and wit earn him the title of the White Tiger – “the rarest of animals – the creature that comes along once in a generation” (*The White Tiger* 35) But Balram refers to himself as “half-baked”:

Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling. Open our skulls, look in with a penlight, and you’ll find an odd museum of ideas: sentences of history or mathematics remembered from school textbooks (no boy remembers his schooling like one who was taken out of school, let me assure you), sentences about politics read in a newspaper while waiting for someone to come to an office, triangles and pyramids seen on the torn pages of the old geometry textbooks which every tea shop in this country uses to wrap its snacks in, bits of All India Radio news bulletins, things that drop into your mind, like lizards from the ceiling, in the half-hour before falling asleep – all these ideas, half formed and half digested and half correct, mix up with other half-cooked ideas in your head, and I guess these half-formed ideas bugger one another, and make more half-formed ideas, and this is what you act on and live with. (*The White Tiger* 10, 11)

Again, Balram compares his situation to the Rooster Coop:

The greatest thing to get out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop.

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 coloured 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 whole cage giving off a horrible stench – the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently

chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. 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.

The very same thing is done with human beings in this country.

(*The White Tiger* 173, 174)

Both these analogies evoke an age of harsh exploitation for the working class. That the novel is undoubtedly an overt polemic about the denunciation of the commercial spirit of modern capitalism criticising the unequal class relationships is corroborated by Adiga's statement in one of his interviews where he said that he wrote the book primarily to capture the voice of the colossal underclass without any sentimentality or without portraying them as humourless weaklings as they generally and invariably are. Adiga, therefore, locates *The White Tiger* within its social, economic and historical context to make us understand how the evils of economic exploitation and the plight of working class relate to the ideals and values circulated in the society. In this social system dominated by market exchange not only is inherent worth of people questioned but the effects of courtesy and the dues of gratitude are determined by price. For example, Pinky Madam's hit-and-run killing is pinned on Balram:

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....

Doesn't the driver's family protest? Far from it. They would actually go about bragging. Their boy Balram had taken the fall, gone to Tihar jail for his employer. He was loyal as dog. He was the perfect servant.

The judges? Wouldn't they see through this obviously forced confession? But they are in the racket too. They take their bribe; they ignore the discrepancies in the case. And life goes on. (*The White Tiger* 170)

In this social system the "colossal underclass" finds itself caught between incomprehensible psychological pressures that shape their desires and social forces that restrict fulfilment of these desires. Working under coercive supervision, they lose all autonomy and personal satisfaction from their work. Thus Adiga makes his debut novel provide a critical understanding of the underlying processes in economic and social relations and comes close to Antoni Gramsci's "organic intellectual" who are needed to develop a new social order by questioning and countering oppressive hegemony. Frederic Jameson suggests that all narratives from the Third World must be treated as allegories. He writes:

A certain nationalism is fundamental in the Third World. Thus the telling of the individual story or experience is the laborious telling of

the experience of the collective itself, and is hence an allegory.  
(Nayar 130)

In the light of these lines, *The White Tiger* does have a social dimension and does speak to concerns that readers recognise as relevant.

The novel evokes a world of near-feudal conditions in its portrayal of Laxmangarh, the village which Balram hails from. The social realities in this part of rural India do provide the grist of Adiga's satire which in one way proves significant because it depicts the internal faults of this feudal world, for instance the trapped, impoverished environment that lacks opportunities and resources with just a few families ruling the roost:

The Buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, and each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him.

The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flowed outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village.

His brother was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh....

The Buffalo was the greediest of the lot. He had eaten up the rickshaws and the roads. So if you ran a rickshaw, or used the road, you had to pay him his feed – one-third of whatever you earned, no less.

All four of the "animals" lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh, the landlords' quarters. They had their own temples inside their mansions, and their own wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed. (*The White Tiger* 24, 25)

Gradually, the novel starts breaking the feudal norms when feudal social relations based on mutual loyalty and trust are confronted with capitalist relations which are based on individual ambition, disrespect for traditional notions of duty and distrust. Being at the receiving end of this feudal world, it is Balram who breaks the feudal rules of reciprocal trust and personal obligations but in doing so he participates in the betrayal of the ideals of service, loyalty and obligation that define one's basic humanity or in his own words "that trustworthiness of servants which is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (*The White Tiger* 175). He dismantles those characteristics that would serve as the basis for a new social order. In fact, the great danger of Balram is that he pretends to follow the ideals of loyalty and trust only to break them for the sake of making his own way in the world:

You should have seen me that day – what a performance of wails and kisses and tears! You'd think I'd been born into a caste of performing actors! And all the time, while clutching the Stork's feet, I was staring at his huge, dirty, uncut toenails, and thinking, *What is he doing in Dhanbad? Why isn't he back home...* (*The White Tiger* 61)

Having grown up amidst starvation and overwhelming oppression, Balram fails to emerge with his honesty and courage intact. His philosophy of social mobility based on productive commercial investments embraces, to begin with, a breach of family duty. In his avidity to rise, family bonds, family allegiance and family obligation cease to have any meaning for Balram now. That his philosophy rests on assumptions of distrust where money and mercantile power have superseded the proletariat rules of obligation and trust is proven with Balram murdering his master, Mr Ashok:

I could gloat that I am not just any murderer, but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father), and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer....

Mr Ashok's face reappears now in my mind's eye as it used to every day when I was in his service – reflected in my rearview mirror. It was such a handsome face that sometimes I couldn't take my eyes off it. Picture a six-foot-tall fellow, broad-shouldered, with a landlord's powerful, punishing forearms; yet always gentle (*almost* always – except for that time he punched Pinky Madam in the face) and kind to those around him, even his servants and driver. (*The White Tiger* 45, 46)

Balram loses his sense of fairness, justice and compassion as he succumbs to the lure of crime as a path out of his abject conditions. The novel ends with Balram pronouncing himself as “A Thinking Man” and a successful entrepreneur with a successful taxi company in Bangalore – a position he enjoys because he has unethically capitalised on opportunities. His financial success is based on his bribing the political office and justifying to himself the heinous crime of his master as an act of class war. The novel, one must say, poses a threat to the cultural ethos of India that is based on the commitment to the egalitarian ideal of individual responsibility where one proves one's worth through industry and frugality when Balram declares that he with his rules of individual ambition, dissent, fraudulence and guile represents the future of India:

I'm tomorrow.

In terms of formal education, I may be somewhat lacking. I never finished school, to put it bluntly. Who cares! I haven't read many books, but I've read all the ones that count. I know by heart the works of the four

greatest poets of all time – Rumi, Iqbal, Mirza Ghalib, and a fourth fellow whose name I forget. I am a self-taught entrepreneur. (*The White Tiger* 6)

Chinua Achebe in his essay “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation” states that writers need not have any pretensions vis-à-vis their past (Killam 10). On the contrary, their integrity shall be determined by the extent to which they acknowledge the bad sides of their past rather than gloat on their good sides alone. What is suggested is the writer’s attempt towards an objective appraisal of his/her nation while holding back the temptation to extol the good points of his/her past and pretending that the bad never existed. Now judged by this criterion, one would easily say that as far as the lack of verisimilitude to India’s postcolonial achievements is concerned, Adiga does fail in his integrity as a writer at least in *The White Tiger*. In other words, he fails to overcome the colonial tendency of undervaluing or rather devaluing indigenous traditional and cultural achievements. The world that he portrays in the text is one without moral values where money is the only good, and corruption and brutality are inevitable. He renders a story of social mobility but reinforces and legitimatises the stereotypical and discursively framed images of the Indian just to create laughter:

One fact about India is that you can take almost anything you hear about the country from the prime minister and turn it upside down and then you will have the truth about that thing. Now, you have heard the Ganga called the river of emancipation, and hundreds of American tourists come each year to take photographs of naked *sadhus* at Hardwar or Benaras, and our prime minister will no doubt describe it that way to you, and urge you to take a dip in it.

No! Mr Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of faeces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids. (*The White Tiger* 15)

*The White Tiger* undoubtedly falls into the “imaginative geography” of the orientalist thought that constructed and thrived on the conceptual divide between the first and third worlds. Edward Said identified three points in *Culture and Imperialism* that manifest decolonising cultural resistance. One is the necessity to see the community’s history whole, coherently and integrally. The second is the need to interrogate the assumptions of imperialist discourse and replace them with a more playful narrative style. And, the third is to pull away from nativism/or separatist nationalism toward a more integrative view of human community and liberation (Said 215-16).

Adiga’s *The White Tiger* refuses to adhere to any one of these. As for the first, Adiga fails to juxtapose squalor, exploitation and corruption with beauty, dignity and humanity. As a result, his glimpse of the Third World is unsettling



to read about. *The White Tiger* remains a repertoire of shocking brutality alone. As far as the second point is concerned, *The White Tiger* has led critics to debate how far he fits a Western cosmopolitan model of writing as Adiga legitimatises and propagates the Eurocentric mental images in the garb of sly humour. It does not challenge the paradigms and intellectual premises of Western thought. As far as the third point of Said is concerned, Adiga does not enter into an inter-civilisational alliance against the dominant nationalist discourse. Through Balram's adoption of a distinct social behaviour, he not only attempts to discover in the working class a counter-hegemonic culture but also participates in the processes by which existing institutions and structures of power are produced. In other words, there is no attempt to alter the existing categories and systems of thought even as he dialectically represents and reinforces class conflict and class distinction. That Adiga is trapped in the very culture he seeks to critique, is evident in this quote from *The White Tiger*:

A great poet, this fellow Iqbal – even if he was a Muslim.  
(By the way, Mr Premier: 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 burqas or looking for buildings to blow up? It's a puzzle, isn't it? If you ever figure these people out, send me an e-mail). (*The White Tiger* 40)

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