



LANGUAGE, DISCOURSE AND SYMBOLS IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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ABSTRACT

Language used in the postcolonial novels plays important roles as the novels have made it a vehicle to express contesting ideological differences between classes, castes, generations, religions and races in the contemporary societal organization. Language becomes a medium of fight with all sort of warfare loaded with socio-linguistic consciousness. It is observed that the form of language the upper, superior class and caste people in the multicultural situation use is a means by which they establish their identity and control over others, the lower strata of the society, both the classes and castes. It is a dialectal form of language displaying their social superiority or status in the hierarchical set up. The lower classes struggle to adjust and, at the same time, revolt with a fire of intolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Discourse can be 'language in use as a social practice' (*Critical Discourse Analysis*, 13). However, it is a 'practice not only presenting the world, but signifying the world, constituting and constructing it in meaning' (*Discourse and Social Change*, 64). Hodge and Kress provide a social semiotic interpretation of a work of art with a different perspective. For the 'message' has a source and a goal, a social context and purpose; 'text' is a structure of messages or message of traces and 'discourse' is 'the social process in which texts are embedded' (*Social Semiotics*, 5-6). The text of the novel taken for discussion here provides signs and sites for recreating identity through language and embeds message for general understanding of the milieu. It is relevant to keep in mind, during the interpretation of the novel that one's identity is 'one's meaning in the world' (*Linguistic Variation as Social Practice*, 87). Identity is perceptible and not an ideological concept; it is derived in two ways: 'individual awareness' of 'self' that is subjective and 'social identity' which constitutes a



‘person’ in a society’ (*Language, Culture and Identity*, 87). Balram and other characters are taken as parts of the social system in the present discussion of the novel.

The attributive factors such as physical, social and psychological provide evidential information helpful to observe the personality of the protagonist, his mind and action as well as of other persons presented in the novel. ‘Physical markers include sex, age, physique and state of health; social markers are regional affiliation, social and educational status, occupation and social role, and psychological markers indicate psychological characteristics of personality and affective state or mood’ (*Phonetic and Linguistic Markers*, 3). The understanding of these traits helps to peer into the personalities of the protagonist and other characters. Balram has evolved out as unique, unsupported by any other persons, with his own deeds.

The title *The White Tiger* is symbolic in its resonance and reminds the readers of a rare, exclusive creature on the earth. In the novel, the symbol is transformed into metaphor and is extended to signal out a boy grown young entrepreneur, who has come of all the way in his life, observed the corrupt world of ‘give and take’, of the rich and the poor, and of the low castes persons’ daily sufferings. His uniqueness lie in his daring act to topple down the power relationship between the rich and the poor, between the illiterate and the literate, historically situated in the Indian social structure.

Balram, the white tiger, is a distinct person traced out by his teacher and the school supervisor. The name ‘Munna’, is a popular term used to call a small boy in the Indian society, known or unknown, but the protagonist receives his name ‘Balram’ from his teacher. The name reminds of a myth from the Mahabharata, “the sidekick of the god Krishna” (*TWT*, 14). For him, Balram is the smartest of the lot. The inspector appreciates the cleverness and intelligence of the boy, “the rarest of the animals”, “the creature that comes along only once in a generation” and calls him “the white tiger... in this jungle” (*TWT*, 35), which is the present India. Literarily taken, the protagonist is a human being but introduced with reference to an animal, symbolically a rare personality which is a type rather than representing a reality. The superlative degrees connote the distinctive qualities of his personality. The inspector recommends the boy for scholarship and gifts a book: *Lessons for the Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. It is in this manner that the local boy becomes the white tiger in Mahatma Gandhi’s India. The character of Balram in Mahabharata represents innocence, faith and friendship. Balram in the novel is an antithetical person though innocent, grown reactionary, indulging in betrayal and murderous mood which is a lesson he learnt to carve out a place in the contemporary world.

The personal life, family background and social status of the boy are described in the placid and sensible words. Balram had to leave the school and attend a tea-shop with Kishan. Other boys from the school sarcastically comment on his being a coal breaker as “the creature that



comes along only once in a generation” (*TWT*, 35). The paradoxical comparison between ‘the white tiger’ and ‘a coal breaker’ cannot change his social standing as they contradict each other. In the eyes of other people, though the teacher and the inspector praised him as ‘the white tiger’, he is an ordinary, poor boy from the lower strata of the society without freedom and self identity, living in the ‘Darkness’, socially alienated in the structure of class and caste hegemony. The iron pervades his life as his identity is designed by the others and the binary opposition posits his intellectual acumen, socio-cultural background and dependent economic condition in contestation and his aspiration to become a respected businessman settled in his life.

As a secular state, India thinks that communal harmony is a central construct achieved in the ‘Imagined community’ in the form of independence but “fails to consider those who are excluded and marginalized such as women or lower classes, races or castes” (*Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 197-8). The parliamentary democracy, after independence, has provided a platform to the rogues in politics to harbor their personal interests and that of their followers ignoring the poor people. The communist Party of India, with its manifesto aimed at the welfare of the poor and workers, has failed in its drive to capture the political power as they could not convince the innocent voters to elect them. The Great Socialist who initially worked for the people indulged in corrupt practice and drifted away from the ideology, a representative of the political outfit. In other words, most of the political parties, who ruled the country, have worked for the rich and privileged, leaving the deprived to their fate.

The structure of the society of India is based on the Varna system yielding caste discrimination which has continued even after independence. But after independence the situation has radically changed. In the wake of independence, the caste practices diminished slightly but the class conflict gained strength and the rich-poor fissure developed firm roots in the Indian soil giving birth to a different culture. This socio-political background has been fore-grounded in the novel.

The master-servant relationship and treatment given to the servant is a representative discussion of the reality prevalent in India. The workers are given jobs after inspecting their castes and the places they belong to Mr. Mukesh is skeptically hesitant to employ the protagonist but the Stork, by keeping his whole life experience in mind, advises: “catch’em young, and you can keep’em for life” (*TWT*, 66). Both the Stork and Mr. Mukesh are the caste conscious persons though educated but Mr. Ashok, under the influence of the Western culture, is a secular person, for he respects the servants and drivers with rare affection. Balram is hit with the sandaled foot in to his back for ‘pressing too hard’ the feet of the Stork. When questioned by Mr. Ashok, he remarks, “They expect it from us....They respect us for it” (*TWT*, 72). Mukesh calls him ‘idiot’ and ‘moron’ and treats with disdain often. Their language expresses their power by “creating and imposing discourses...to foster particular kinds of identities to suit their own purposes” (*Language and power*, 1). Thinking that he is



an illiterate and coarse in behavior Pinky calls him a yokel from the village. The language is here a medium of power dominance, a maker of the social superiority whereby the sense of inferiority is implanted into the poor servants' psyche, perpetuating cultural conflict.

Balram is a low caste, halwai, and has no caste identity, no religion and no economic foundation except excluded and marginalized, often humiliated life being without regard for the past. He does not know his date of birth like his parents. As with his master, he is rude and aggressive towards his nephew when latter comes to live with him. He has forgotten his family members, mother and brother in his struggle to shape his own identity. Balram, with all odd commitments and personal action, is possessed of the self-spirit, writes history, sometimes re-structuring the history of their pathetic condition. For them Balram is a "County Mouse!" (*TWT*, 147); "He's raw from the village, still pure. Let city life corrupt him first" (*TWT*, 147). Other drivers inform him that he "looked like a monkey in that uniform" (*TWT*, 131). The language used by Balram and other drivers is similar and denotes their social group and social identity in terms of linguistic expression but with a difference in thinking. His acceptance of such comments does not disturb his patience and defy his tolerance of the insults. With commitments he lives in the company of the ordinary sojourners without revealing his meditation on the plan, constructing his mind and body to behave accordingly.

In 'white T-shirt' and 'black shoes', Balram could change his identity. He enters the mall with nerve which is a first sign of radical transformation taking place in his thought. The spying eyes, as he knows that of the watchmen, needed courage to question his identity or examine the system. He works out his plan systematically and proves that if a poor person acts with determination, he can achieve his objectives. Most of the time he sits in "the lotus position" (*TWT*, 193, 280) like the Buddha, lost in his meditation quite often, though it appears strange to other drivers. It is his attempt to find out self voice from within, enlightening his consciousness, the way of the life of 'self-respect' that he is in search of, unperturbed. He is with the drivers but alienated, for the former endures their present social condition while he strives to release him from the social confinement and slavish mentality which is disgusting and torturing for him.

Various signs have been employed for the construction of social reality. The words 'Darkness' and 'Light', placed along with different adverbials, function in different ways to underline the specific features of the places, the persons, and the world that combines people, races, religions, gods, goddesses, cultures and practices, traditional in nature. In the novel these words are highly connotative and functional as the protagonist uses them in various contexts. The phrase, "my dark story" (*TWT*, 9) refers to the story of the protagonist's simple, rustic and criminal life, "The Autobiography of a half-baked Indian" (*TWT*, 10). In "...I am in the light now but I was born and raised in Darkness" (*TWT*, 14), 'light' and 'darkness' connote the places, Delhi and Bangalore, the prosperous cities and Laxmangarh, a rural sight



undeveloped, respectively which map his journey of life from the state of utter poverty to enviable prosperity. The antithetical parallelism sweeps over the whole stretch of the narrative.

The region of Dhanbad, famous for plentiful coal, is the land in the Darkness where more coal is found than elsewhere in the world. The village Laxmangarh is also the area of the Darkness. India, the country, is “the Darkness” (*TWT*, 68). The people living in India are so religious in the Darkness. During elections people go mad ‘in the Darkness’, in either the villages or the cities but India. Having listened to the speeches and the slogans and reading the posters, the innocent and illiterate people feel “free of the Darkness” (*TWT*, 101), which is a self deceiving presumption. Ashok’s father, being a rich man, tries to save ‘income tax’ with the help from “the greatest socialist” (*TWT*, 121), the corrupt society and government machinery. He has no “choice in the darkness” (*TWT*, 121). The poor families and the lower societies are the victim of his contrived plans.

In the room, the protagonist shared with, Ram Prasad moves with masterly order, but the protagonist is like a slave, “adding thought to thought in the dark” (*TWT*, 108). It is under the pressure of the poverty that he puts up with him with disgrace. The departure of ram Prasad alias Mohammad, a man living with his hidden identity, provides an opportunity to Balram to become a faithful and commanding driver, and the opportunity automatically lands in his hands to accompany Mr. Ashok and Pinky madam to Delhi. The news received by his family members makes them feel proud and elevated, that one of their relatives goes to New Delhi to make fortune “out of the Darkness” (*TWT*, 111). His appointment as a driver is a matter of social elevation and recognition of his driving skills. His relatives are awestruck to see him in the khaki dress. He could have never got an opportunity to go to Delhi and drive “an air-conditioned car!” (*TWT*, 112) in his life. As he moves forward in his personal life he ignores his close, blood relationship.

The metaphor of ‘darkness’ and ‘light’ are juxtaposed to focus the binary aspects of life. Being a murderer, Balram should have gone in hiding but he is the man who lives in public domain without fear of any sort: “...the police searched for me in darkness: but I hid in light”, he claims (*TWT*, 118). The protagonist is a villager, little educated but he says, “The wonders of modern science never cease to argue me!” (*TWT*, 142). He does not live in an imaginary world as he knows the ground realities of life. The traditional society and religion have made him think that he is born to be a servant. His real experiences away from the rustic life transformed his state of mind. He leans: “You were looking for the key/ But the door was always open!” (*TWT*, 257). Ashok cannot understand his driver’s language and intention and disregard the downy revelation of the decision which is converted into reality, later.

‘The rooster coop’ is a metaphor reverberating with deeper meanings. It is a kind of pen for fowls, male and female, which remain insight awaiting their turn for sacrifice, ruled by their



master, the butcher. In India, the poor people like servants and divers are confined in a din, a kind of coop. They are mentally and physically enslaved and their movement is controlled by their masters' order. Like fowls, they are slave to their masters and do not rebel. They do not try out of the coop. For example, the drivers of the rich families or landlords are faithful persons: "But leave a million dollar in front of a servant and he won't touch a penny" (*TWT*, 175). The protagonist describes their servile attitude and self-submission to the rich and high caste people as if their present obsequious social status is inevitable and natural.

India has a rich cultural history and splendid parliamentary democracy. The Great Socialist with his initial enthusiasm, worked honestly for the people. But in the course of time "...the mud of Mother Ganga has sucked him in" (*TWT*, 97). He ruled 'the Darkness' with crafty indulgence in murder, rape, smuggling, pimping and many dreaded activities but lost the prestige. Even the people have no power to think about a governance: "Like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections in Laxmangarh" (*TWT*, 98). The Servants of the people live inside the coop as if they are conditioned culturally, unable to set themselves free:

A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 percent as strong as tolerated, as intelligent in every way to exist in perpetual 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. (*TWT*, 176)

However, there is symptom of change: "That fellow has balls' one driver said. If all of us were like that, we'd rule India, and they would be polishing our boots" (149).

When in the village, Balram does not hassle about animals such as "rats, snakes, monkeys and mongooses" (*TWT*, 24). But lizard is a kind of threat for him:

But lizard...each time I see one, no matter how tiny, it's as if I turn into a girl. My blood freezes (*TWT*, 28).

He left the school after a horrifying experience in the school when the boys held a big lizard before his eyes and he fainted. When he observes a lizard in his bed he shrieks, and asks his nephew to get it out of his bed. He watches him smash the lizard under his feet and asks him to throw it away. He takes it as his escape, takes final decision to terminate his master's life. Now he uses the animal to describe his hand used for scratching the groin and its movement is compared with "the way the lizard goes stealthily up a wall" (*TWT*, 150). The man, hear the protagonist, who was afraid of lizard, has turned into a lizard, a cruel, selfish creature: The thought to kill Mr. Ashok has been rumbling in his mind, making his body shiver. His hand has been trembling since the time he broke the Johny Walker Bottle, converting it into a weapon to be used for killing Ashok: "It has been shaking all morning like a lizard's tail that

has fallen off” (274). He is the same person who had run away from the school where lizards had made their home but resolved to accomplish his decision.

Balram is provoked to murder Mr. Ashok by his own thoughts and dreams. The crisscrossing thoughts that prompt his mind and compel him to act are more psychological reaction in nature. Once the decision is taken he plans out his roadmap and the place to be settled down. He thinks,

...the history of the world is the history of a ten thousand year war of brain between the rich and the poor. Each side is eternally trying to hoodwink the other side: and it has been this way since the start of time. (TWT, 254)

By using same tactics, he rewrites the history this time by winning the battle as he successfully executes his plan after murdering his master. The ‘red bag’ full of money is his motive to possess and he has done it smartly with which he starts a business. It is really difficult to believe that Balram could kill his master. However, his mind is vitiated not by the treatment he received from his master but his pursuit for money which is the source stability and security. He is a product of social injustice, the class of the society has sustained for generation. The atrocities and exploitation have bred violent thinking in him which has culminated in social retaliation.

The protagonist prominently employs animal imagery to bring out the specific features of individual persons, their nature and art of working in everyday life. “...Indians just take to technology like ducks to water” (TWT, 12) connotes Indians’ natural expertise in handling modern technology. The illiterate and rustic people as well as the low caste people mostly use images, symbols and metaphors from their ordinary life to express their experience and knowledge of the surrounding world. Animals, birds and creatures are the sources of reference by means of which they study human nature and predict behavior. One of the landlords in Laxmangarh is ‘Buffalo’, the nature derived from the ‘peculiarity of appetite’, and the stork, a bird, his brother is a ‘Wild Boar’, the owner of the agriculture land around Laxmangarh. He has two teeth, on either side of his nose, long and curved like ‘little tusks’ of an elephant. There is another person looking like the Raven, the large black crow with a sharp beak. The buffalo, the stork, the wild boar, the raven, bring out the features of the personalities of the persons turned animals,

...the animals stayed and fed on the village, and everything that grew in it, until there was nothing left for anyone else to feed on (TWT, 26).

Though they are rich, illiterate and cultured, the comparison foregrounds the primitive, instinctual and impulsive behavior of the high-caste persons, their shrewdness with which they exercise their privilege over the poor people.

The rich man of the village, who is in couch and luxurious mansion, looks like a premium “cotton pillow, white and soft and black”, a representative of the class (*TWT*, 26), but the poor rickshaw-puller is like a ‘knotted rope’ with ‘cuts and nicks and scars’ (*TWT*, 27), and his body displays the deprived condition of life: “the story of a poor man’s life is written on his body, in a sharp pen” (*TWT*, 27). In India, in the big cities, many people belonging to the lower strata of the society live in slum or poor localities, in the absence of any work to earn money, take to rickshaw-driving. Every rickshaw driver is “a human beast of burden” (*TWT*, 27), and it is their perpetual identity.

The protagonist’s father, so much exploited in his life, feels that he was treated like a donkey. The human resources working in the tea shops along the Banks of the Ganga are “human spiders” (*TWT*, 51). Ashok’s brother Mukesh is called Mongoose. The room, Balram lived, is full of “the roaches” (*TWT*, 132). All small vehicle riders go in masks. But the cars of the rich “with their tinted windows up” look like “dark egg” (*TWT*, 134) and in this matter he challenges Darwin’s concept of the origin of the species. Mr. Mukesh calls him donkey in “Why are you ginning like a donkey?” (*TWT*, 145). Both the protagonist and his nephew, in the crowd, sweated like pigs. The protagonist is very obedient to his master: “I crouched on the floor, happy as a dog...” (*TWT*, 166). The imagery of ‘dog’ reappears in “he was loyal as dog” (*TWT*, 170). “The monkey circle” (*TWT*, 228) stands for the driver’s group, the poor people working with the rich without reaction. In this matter the novelist strives to invest meaning into the discourse as the situation demands, extending the connotative reflexes of the words; the literal meaning in the expression is rejuvenated. The animal imagery is a part of the communicative strategy.

‘Body’ of a poor, low caste person is a marker of his physical condition and social standing. The protagonist describes his father’s body whose, 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, ran down his chest and waist, reaching down below his hipbones into buttocks (*TWT*, 26-27).

The sentence, “The story of a poor man’s life is written on his body, in a sharp pen” (*TWT*, 27) is a true statement. He is economically weak and physically fragile, ‘sticklike man’ but he has a vision and plan to educate his son. When he learnt that his son left school after watching a lizard wobbling in the room, he killed it ruthlessly, sat besides the mural of the Lord Buddha and regretted; “...’My whole life. I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine-at least one- should live like a man” (*TWT*, 30). The optimism in a poor man’s mind is a voice of the common man.



The Ganga, now named the national river- a symbol, “the daughter of Vedas, river of illumination, protector of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth” is ‘the black river’(TWT, 14,15) in the contemporary times. It is the river, the so called holy and scared, worshipped by the Hindus, which has not fertilized the sides around its banks nor the superstitious people turned into persons with wisdom and understanding. It is a highly polluted river with “feces, straw, soggy, parts of human bodies, buffalo, carrions and seven different kinds of industrial acids” (TWT, 15). The river has lost her spiritual quality ones the people of the country believed in. she has not salvaged the country from different illness and corruptions by punishing the corrupt politicians and the rich men and blessing the poor.

Slang is a part of language with ‘social intention as its connotative force’. In *The White Tiger*, the use of slang can be viewed in relation to “psychic and communicative actions, which involves cognitive processes” (*Socio-Semiotic and Psycho-Communicative Dimensions of Slang*, 9). Balram belongs to the lower social class, but its application is strengthened by his anger and outburst through his speech as if he intends to pour out the range fermenting in his mind. Like a traditional Indian story teller, the protagonist calls upon god/goddess to begin his discourse:

I guess, your Excellency, which 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 Christian have three gods. And we Hindus have 36,000,004 gods. Making a grand total of 36,000,004 divine arises for we to choose from (TWT, 6).

His intention to start telling his story by kissing some god’s arse is a vehement attack on the ancient folkloristic tradition. He indirectly takes for critical evaluation “the number 786” and “the Goddess Laxmi” of the Hindu. Being a heist, he does not respect Gods, religion or any other sect. he is an angry young man so grown out of the innocent Balram who is never to be expected to use standard language adopted by the high class, cultured people. He learns from Pinky: “what a fucking joke” (TWT, 7) and uses elsewhere: ‘Fuck’, basically a word denoting sexual intercourse, connotes annoyance and contempt in: “...you sister-fucker?” (TWT, 34), “...the fuck bastards” (TWT, 55), and “...the Nepali fucker?” (TWT, 60). At other places he uses local dialect from the particular locality he lives in, for instance, in “...our erstwhile master of white-skinned man has wasted himself through buggery...” (TWT, 6). The speaker’s innocence is naturally indicated in “You can’t expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet” (TWT, 33).

Obscenity, in the novel, is channeled through direct expressions and sometime loaded as required by the context in the text. The old man ‘Stork’, had used different means to exploit people, “screwing poor fisher men of their money and humping their daughter?” (TWT, 6).

After observing constant bickering between Mr. Ashok and his wife, Pinky, he wonders, "...what was going on with her was she having a fight with her husband?" (TWT, 72).

Language is a token of identity assertion for Balram, revolting against the established social standard, cultural ascendancy and politics of power. The tone, meaning and values enshrined in the language are the indicators of power to be grasped through the volatile claims in the novel, through the protagonist's voice and mark *The White Tiger* very special, characteristically representative of the postmodern society where language is a signaling system of expression of restlessness, acquisition of freedom, asseverate declaration of identity in various fields of social life, hitherto denied in the multicultural, multilingual set up of the present Indian society. The oppressed people, along with other means of resistance, use their own language to cry out the nullifying experience continuing in their psyche, often hunting irresistibly. It is a man against culture. There is 'no functional complexity in the use of language and issue of identity and selfhood in general' (*Language, Situation and the Relational self theorizing dialect style in sociolinguistics*, 188). Balram makes stylistic choices; focusing on the potential of the words and the meaning they acquire in particular social set up based on his association with his social group. The way Balram uses language is influenced by his "social network" and "social situations" (*Language Gender and sexuality*, 209).

The novel is a social criticism and satire chartered through a comic mode of expression. Language is functional in the exposition of social structure of India and the evil working in it. As Bakhtin argues, 'utterances and their types' as we find in the novel, 'are speech genres' which 'are the drive belts from the history of society to the history of language' (*The Problem with Speech Genres*, 65). Balram uses the register that is essentially a part of language and its dynamics, for the most part put into daily usage to communicate the history of the Indian society where caste-class discrimination and exploitation of the poor social classes by the rich is an uncontrolled and trendy practice. The novelist has achieved a synthesis of multiple points if view through the use of language.

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