

Capitalism, Caste, and Con-Games in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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غلامی کیا ہے؟ ذوق حسن و زیبائی سے محرومی
جسے زیبا کہیں آزاد بندے، بے وہی زیبا!

“What is slavery? Exile from the love of beauty
Only freemen know what beauty is!”
—Iqbal, “Bal-e-Jibril” (21.1-2)

“Iqbal, who is one of the four best poets in the world—the others being Rumi, Mirza Ghalib, and a fourth fellow, also a Muslim, whose name I’ve forgotten—has written a poem where he says this about slaves: *They remain slaves because they can’t see what is beautiful in the world.*”
—Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (34)

Authenticity and the English of the Slum *Bildungsroman*

When Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* won the Booker Prize in 2008 it created a sensation. To the chagrin of those who preferred the dazzling narratives of subcontinental success, the novel confronted the dark reality of India’s poverty and shattered the stereotypes of what kinds of Indian fiction could be marketed globally. The novel seemed to be edging out the magical realist, national allegory (Goh 337) in favor of slick, urban noir (troublingly called ‘the condition-of-India novel’) and its attendant themes: corruption, chaos and, significantly, cruelty (Detmers 535). Two debates quickly arose about the novel and its darker vision of Indian capitalism: first, whether or not the nation was really doing that badly; second, whether or not the novel could be considered inauthentic in its representations of the poor. The Anglophone Indian novel has long been preoccupied with debates about its authenticity, its penchant for trading its connections to exotica for western audiences (Chaudhuri xxi). The debate about English-language fiction had previously been related to the conflict of vernacular groups critiquing the dominance of Anglophone cultural capital (called the “India vs. Bharat” problem) (Bardhan 54-9). But this debate about the novel was not about representing the real, rural “Bharat”;

rather, the critics charged that the novel's English betrayed a deeper disconnect with the urban reality of "India"—the cityscape in which the Anglophone novel had staked out its empire. The novel did not know how its urban characters really *felt* because it did not understand how they really *spoke*: fine prose and poverty apparently could not coexist.

The central problem of *The White Tiger* was the voice of its narrator. Sanjay Subrahmanyam penned one of the most excoriating critiques of the novel in the *London Review of Books*:

What of Balram Halwai? What does he sound like? Despite the odd *namaste*, *daal*, *paan* and *ghat*, his vocabulary is not sprinkled with North Indian vernacular terms. His sentences are mostly short and crudely constructed, apparently a reflection of the fact that we're dealing with a member of the 'subaltern' classes. He doesn't engage in Rushdian word-play. But he does use a series of expressions that simply don't add up. He describes his office as a 'hole in the wall.' He refers to 'kissing some god's arse,' an idiomatic expression that doesn't exist in any North Indian language ... This is a posh English-educated voice trying to talk dirty, without being able to pull it off ... What we are dealing with is someone with no sense of the texture of Indian vernaculars, yet claiming to have produced a realistic text. (Subrahmanyam)

First, Subrahmanyam is concerned with realism and its relationship to class and vernacular speech, a critique predicated on the inability of English to capture the idiom of the poor. In this argument, Subrahmanyam may have been hinting at more than the superiority of vernacular fiction over its inauthentic cousin; he may have also been implying just how substantially English acquisition functions as the border between the poor and the middle classes, such that the poor cannot easily pass. Secondly, Subrahmanyam's understanding of verisimilitude and realism rests on the idea that Balram Halwai, the driver with a "half-baked education," can only ever speak the broken English or the rustic Bhojpuri that he would have acquired in the dismal schools in Bihar. The narrative is not a good version of Balram trying to act rich; it is a bad version of Adiga slumming.

Pankaj Mishra responded briefly to Subrahmanyam, arguing that linguistic markers were useless in determining identity:

Subrahmanyam mocks Halwai, who cannot read Urdu, for claiming Mirza Ghalib as his favorite poet. But North Indians who cannot read Urdu have long had access to the great writers of that language in Devanagari script. According to Subrahmanyam, the expression "'kissing some god's arse' ... doesn't exist in any North Indian language." How does he know? In actuality, millions of speakers of Hindi, or Hinglish, improvise such commonplace idioms daily, too prodigiously, perhaps, to be archived at the American university where Subrahmanyam teaches history. (Mishra)

Mishra's point about the possibility that such a polyglot and accidental combination of literary traditions, languages, and idioms even more accurately mark the character's viability shifted the terms of the older authenticity debate. Now the vernacular/English dyad is being replaced by a conflict between a polished English and the more arbitrary and inventive Pidgin produced by new social relations, what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling" (Williams 128-35). Adiga's novel superficially

endorses Mishra's reading; Balram comes from a specific life-world of the poor worker in the service economy:

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. (Adiga 8)

Mishra and Adiga agree that Balram is in fact a random mixture of ideas, discourses, and texts: a radically individual linguistic and ideological repertoire resulting from an anarchic life.

This connection between speech and authenticity also becomes the mask behind which the novel's con-game operates, what Amitav Kumar calls "a first-person narration [disguising] a cynical anthropology," since the polyglot idiom now becomes proof simultaneously of the lack of decent educational opportunities and the mark of new class privilege (Kumar). Balram's speech carries the burden of having to reveal his poor past and open doors to his rich future, which is another way of saying that Balram is also a figure for a slumming author. The problem with slumming is that it relies on the narrative structure of exposé and simultaneously announces its own unreliability as a narrative of dissemblance: the very structure of the novel's authenticity becomes the structure of its con (Seaton 43). The revelation that the poor can act like the rich paradoxically functions as a critique of both capitalism and socialism simultaneously, since, in this view, class is neither a permanent feature of capitalism nor an identity that can produce solidarity. In fact the con-game of class can only end in one place, one that undermines the universal character of capital only to re-establish it on a stronger footing (Mukherjee 284-5).

At least as early as *The Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx wrote of the need assiduously to differentiate the groups that called themselves "communist." Two of these strains, what Marx calls "petty-bourgeois socialist" and "bourgeois socialist," muddy the political waters by offering confusing critiques of the economic dispensation. The petty-bourgeois socialist, Marx argues, "dissected with great acuteness the contradictions in the conditions of modern production" but "when stubborn historical facts had dispersed all intoxicating effects of self-deception, this form of socialism ended in a miserable fit of the blues" (Marx 75-6). Bourgeois socialists, on the other hand, "want all the advantages of modern social conditions without the struggles and dangers necessarily resulting therefrom": "Bourgeois socialism attains adequate expression when, and only when, *it becomes a mere figure of speech*. Free trade: for the benefit of the working class. Protective duties: for the benefit of the working class. Prison reform: for the benefit of the working class. This is the last word and the only seriously meant word of bourgeois socialism. It is

summed up in the phrase: the bourgeois is bourgeois—for the benefit of the working class” (Marx 82). The petty-bourgeois socialist is critical of the destructive character of capitalism but has no recourse other than a conservative defense of the social order to which he or she belongs (guilds or patriarchy), while the bourgeois socialist critiques capitalism in order to salvage capitalism from itself. The problem that Marx isolates in both instances is that the class character of these respective “socialisms” is hidden behind the language used to propagate them. These socialisms work best as “mere figure[s] of speech” that only reveal their real political content in the time-lapse photography of history.

Under neoliberalism, though, the rhetorical transformation of socialist ideas into capitalist ones accelerates as poverty-alleviation discourses shift from referring to state-led industrialization schemes to neoliberal models of growth. In his ethnography of the Indian bureaucracy in northern India, Akhil Gupta argues that poverty alleviation in India was governed by two historically differentiated but overlapping discourses, neither of which ultimately altered the condition of “poverty as structural violence” (Gupta 19). Despite the liberalization project that accelerated in 1991, Gupta argues that neoliberalism did not completely displace the redistribution schemes of the “developmental state,” so that

[d]evelopment planning in India ... has been the hallmark of the postcolonial sovereign national state and yet has always been inflected by transnational processes and ideologies. Whereas centralized, socialist planning like that under Nehru dominated roughly the first four decades of independent India, the post-liberalization Indian state’s development planning agenda is shaped by global neoliberal ideas and policies. (Gupta 241)

In place of the developmental states’ emphasis on “governmental assistance and handouts,” the post-liberalization state produced a new discourse of self-help: “The new buzzwords were *empowerment*, *microcredit*, and *entrepreneurialism*” (Gupta 242). *The White Tiger* exists troublingly on the edge of this shift in ideological terminology.

The Compulsory Truth-Telling of Slum Fiction

From the beginning of Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai (nee Ashok Kumar) promises his reader (the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao) access to “truth about Bangalore,” a synecdoche for the IT-driven economic boom of India’s early twenty-first century (Adiga 2). Balram cautions Jiabao that he will be shown a whitewashed India, as the prime minister will offer platitudes about “how moral and saintly India is,” while the truth about Bangalore’s success stems from unsavory conditions under which “entrepreneurship is born, nurtured, and developed in this, the glorious twenty-first century of ... the *yellow* and the *brown* man” (Adiga 4). Balram’s critique of a sanitized India is total: “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” (Adiga 12). This promise to expose the real India—the crushing rural poverty which relegates half the population to “The Darkness” (the novel’s label for Bihar) and the blatant corruption and cruelty by which the rich hold on to their fortunes in “The Light” (New Delhi)—hints at what some critics have mistakenly read as an allegorical “communist manifesto, [a plea] strongly for the classless society” (Singh 111). For others, the mere presentation of the fact of class inequality is sufficient to destroy the claims that capitalism makes on being the “end of history.” The purported connection between poverty and truth, that the closer one is to abjection the farther one is from ideology, is a recurring trope of most fiction about the poor. In Balram Halwai, a victim of the caste-based poverty that is rampant in the “The Darkness,” the narrative finds its credentialed slum tour-guide.

But Balram is not a class warrior, and his claims on the truth are thin. Balram only escapes the poverty of the Darkness and the corruption of the Light by killing his boss, stealing his money and identity, and becoming a “self-taught entrepreneur,” a narrative which not only moves him outside of the halo of reliability but also transforms him into the very object of his critique. Betty Joseph sees the appropriative maneuver of speaking through the poor as a part of the novel’s “neoliberal allegory”: “Adiga brilliantly satirizes neoliberalism through ventriloquism. When the White Tiger is the mouthpiece, we hear neoliberal entrepreneurial shibboleths *as* criminality” (Joseph 72). But Joseph’s desire to make the novel an allegory of neoliberalism over-relies on the very dissimulating voice under question. For instance, even when the astute reader knows that Adiga’s Balram has mistranslated the verse from Iqbal’s *Bal-e-Jibreel* by turning a critique of slavery into a libertarian critique of the slave (moving from Iqbal’s Marx to Iqbal’s Nietzsche), it is impossible to pierce through the narrator’s cagey sincerity. The problem with slumming and passing is that one can never know when the deception ends.

The mechanics of both passing and slumming have long been used to undermine the various regimes of authenticity which protect both the racialized subject of Enlightenment and the classed subject of capital. But the odd part about Adiga’s *The White Tiger* is that the movement of passing and slumming (happening in the same character at the same time) from one caste/class position to another actually generates a tension between the anti-casteist politics of passing and the anti-capitalist politics of slumming. If the transformation of a poor Bihari from the “Darkness” to a rich entrepreneur from Bangalore is generative of a critique of a corrupt and exploitative capitalism that produces a caste-based poverty in the first place, then the transition of a middle-caste Halwai into a crypto-Brahmin undermines the very emotional resources of the anti-capitalist critique by relying on caste-bound representational politics.

Ritu Birla, at least, suggests one way that this resolution to the caste-class tension could be maintained is by understanding that caste-based identity has served historically as a gateway, ideologically and materially,

to successful enterprise. Marwari business classes relied on family networks to advance economic strategies that were anathema to British observers who repeatedly attempted to undermine them as unregulated gambling. Crucially, at the turn of the century, some of the greatest industrialists under British colonialism utilized their caste connections to advance their class agenda (Birla 233). But this is precisely the strategy of linking caste to class that Balram Halwai does not pursue: his transformation into a rich Brahmin happens not by organizing the petty fortunes of his family into surplus capital that can be reinvested; rather, he secures his place in the ranks of the rich paradoxically by legitimizing a caste atrocity against his kin. If the path to economic success is blocked on one side by access to proper English, it is blocked on the other by the durable residue of caste, what Perry Anderson has controversially called “the Indian Ideology” (Anderson). It is precisely by shifting the narratives of caste into narratives of class that *The White Tiger* reveals the limits of passing and slumming as narratives of social transformation.

The Con-Game of Poverty Capital

In addition to the awkward caste politics of *The White Tiger* are the contradictory ways that the middle class sees the poor as both innocent and criminal. If the poor are victims of poverty, that poverty also makes them criminals, in part as a result of the illegality of unplanned, slum housing and the criminal networks which allow the poor to defend themselves (Davis 41). As a result, their escape from poverty is narrated as the conning of the rich out of their supposedly hard-earned wealth: through the dwindling benefits offered up by the state or through the various criminal acts, the poor are seen to survive on the unwitting largesse of the rich. In these narratives, the poor putatively dupe the rich by passing as idealized versions of the rich themselves (Shingavi 99). Ironically, then, the more beautiful the con-game, the more its qualities of resistance fold back into strategies of assimilation: the poor become indistinguishable from the rich (Spivak 398). Even more troublingly, the poor then slip criminally between the cracks created by liberal humanism, thereby revealing that the real victims of poverty are, in fact, the rich. This critique of liberal humanism is isomorphic with twenty-first-century ideologies of India’s economic liberalization and antagonistic to the caste-based system of reservations for public sector jobs (Oza 15-6). It bears underlining that this ideology is doubly self-serving: the rich maintain their wealth in India only by cleverly erasing traces of their own criminal corruption.

Poverty now either becomes the scene of aesthetic rehabilitation that finds even in the gutters something beautiful (an aesthetics of slumming), or the scene of perfect aesthetic lack as poverty is critiqued for its dehumanizing reduction of life to mere survivalist strategies (the paranoid

aesthetics of passing). Slum dwellers and the very poor are depicted not only as the abject (what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “the new savage condition”) but also as the industrious and the clever (Chakrabarty 7). Slumming and passing, incidentally, have both become ways to revive different versions of entrepreneurialism, which find their new heroes in the ranks of the poor. Different versions of capitalism are redeemed in the era of neoliberal austerity by this renewed focus on poverty (the poor are either better capitalists than the capitalists or they challenge the capitalists to be better). This redemptive narrative of capitalism is reproduced despite the fact that slum entrepreneurship actually cannibalizes the assets of the poor and fragments existing jobs into multiple, shared occupations in the informal sector, leaving more people worse off than before, a process that Mike Davis calls “urban involution” (Davis 180-5). So when the rich look at the poor they see spectral versions of themselves, as their ideologies of poverty spectatorship (what Alice Munro calls “poverty porn”) classify the various species of class as both identities in flux and contradictorily genetically fixed (i.e. wealth becomes a marker of both class and caste) (Frenzel 57). Importantly, both understandings of class have developed in the wake of failed state-led attempts at poverty alleviation, either because those attempts are necessarily seen as ways to siphon wealth away from the poor (corruption) or because they are seen as ways to siphon wealth away from the rich (over-taxation), both of which have become the dominant themes of the politics of austerity (Harvey 19). Poverty in these circumstances is only overcome by virtue of moral fineness (so that to be rich is to deserve) or by moral corruption (so that any upward mobility marks ethical opprobrium).

These narratives of desperation, however, are also funneled into ideologies of entrepreneurial dynamism, partly through a liberal humanism which argues that because slum dwellers can be industrious they should not be seen as inhuman. All of these narratives aggregate into the doubled identity of what Ananya Roy calls “poverty capital,” the simultaneous financialization of development through the democratization of capital and “the currency of poverty experts” (30-2). In Roy’s telling, “poverty capital” marks the synthesis between the development of new specialized knowledges about how the poor actually live and attempts at realizing greater returns on investments as capital seeks to financialize the labor of the very poor. The interest in the poor is not the exclusive purview of anti-capitalists, as the poor, especially women, are offered primetime spots in the narratives of “gender and development,” itself an alibi for both neocolonial predation and racialized sexism (Spivak 148). But in poverty capital, the veneer of social responsibility and the unassailable posture of helping the helpless obscure deeper forms of exploitation. As a result, poverty capital is also moral money-laundering, as the negative consequences of neoliberalism become occasions to generate even more neoliberalism: “In the wake of neoliberalism and the decline of the welfare state, the new forms of social distribution are

corporate philanthropic projects that operate under the moniker ‘social entrepreneurship’” (Rule 89).

Poverty capital is another way to describe the contradiction at the heart of *The White Tiger*, a contradiction that can be expressed in the narrative (a sympathetic character whose actions render him unsympathetic), at the level of form (a paranoid postmodernism that resists omniscience and an impulse towards realist truisms), at the level of politics (a critique of crony capitalism and an endorsement of entrepreneurialism), and at the level of historical changes (between the Nehruvian socialism of the state capitalist 1950s and the neoliberalism of the city-centered twenty-first century). Each of these contradictions stems from the novel’s deep attachment to libertarian ideologies of the individual subject through which the failures of liberal humanism to provide economic advancement for the vast majority become indictments of the failures of social democracy. Poverty is aggregate even if it produces individualized encounters with abjection and deprivation. Ideologies of individualism, then, not only critique the structures of dispossession, but also end up critiquing the mass of the dispossessed as well, since the escape from poverty comes wrapped in the halo of the exceptional individual. In order to avoid the trap of aggregate identities, and therefore of capitalism as a whole, the main target of the novel’s critique ends up being the extended family, a metonym for caste identity, which becomes a drag on the otherwise enterprising individual. The inability to resolve the problem of massive, permanent poverty in India produces the populist libertarian solution that Adiga presents to uneven capitalist development in India and the persistence of caste (Roy 18-32). This simultaneously radical and conservative worldview requires an unreliable and cagey narrator whose shifting loyalties are as much a part of his own delusional sense of self as they are necessary subterfuges behind which capitalism restores its dwindling ideological fortunes.

Despite his claims to be able to show the real India, Balram also confesses he cannot be trusted: “My country is the kind where it pays to play it both ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time” (Adiga 6). The style of the novel, its steely, unadorned prose and its first-person epistolary structure, as well as its interest in a conspicuously vulgar but still measured voice is a necessary feature of its politics. Inasmuch as the novel wants to raise the specter of Naxalism (the ongoing, armed, peasant revolution against the rich), it also wants to avoid the easy metamorphosis of the White Tiger into a rebel in the jungle. The novel ends with the hope of building a new, entrepreneurial school to train a generation of “white tigers,” even though the initial conceit of the title is to suggest that only White Tiger is “the rarest of animals—the creature that comes alone only once in a generation” (Adiga 30). The detour of a *Bildungsroman* about the necessity of violence for upward mobility back into its rightful home in the privatized classroom is at least partly explained by the viciousness with which the middle-class regards its social and caste lessers who have

putatively crowded them out of positions of opportunity in higher education in India.

The Caste-based Origins of Poverty Capital

The debate about passing as a strategy of resistance centers on the mechanical effectiveness of certain acts of transgression in producing either discursive or material transformations; while most critics agree that passing is one amongst many survival tools that the weak possess, there is little agreement on whether or not the act itself generates enough momentum to undo the binary logics which make it necessary (Moriel 201). To pass successfully means not only to slip past the gaze of the watchful critic or the racist police but also to risk slipping into “too critical a celebration of the ‘hybrid,’ which inadvertently legitimizes the ‘pure’ by reversal” (Spivak 65). This double-edged nature of mimicry (as passing and slumming) breaks down, Spivak argues, into “the upwardly class-mobile metropolitan ruse of recoding mimicry as resistance” (Spivak 364).

The politics of the novel turn on whether Balram’s murder of his boss is justifiable, whether the novel gives a bleak enough picture of poverty to make the murder not only moral but also necessary. But if the novel spends most of its time worried about the dead boss, it intentionally leaves the murder of Balram’s family (itself a kind of caste atrocity) off-stage. And even though Balram uses the implicit threat against his family to steel his rage against his employer, he needs his family to die so that he can escape the quicksand of caste. As a result, becoming an entrepreneur in the context of the novel requires two symbolically dense murders: the murder of the employer (and therefore murder of the self-as-laborer) and the murder of the family (murder of the caste-bound self). It is therefore not surprising that the extended family and the family of the capitalist are both ruled by buffaloes, one an actual animal, the other a moniker for the patriarch. If the extended family is forced to depend on the water buffalo, it does so by starving itself: “All day long, the women fed her and fed her fresh grass; feeding her was the main thing in their lives. All their hopes were concentrated in her fatness, sir. If she gave enough milk, the women could sell some of it, and there might be a little more money at the end of the day ... She was the dictator of our house!” (Adiga 17) The rich landlord turned capitalist, on the other hand, is merely the human avatar of the family’s livestock: “The Buffalo was 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” (Adiga 21). Balram’s father, a rickshaw-puller, is then devoured by both family and landlord: “The women would feed him after they fed the buffalo” (Adiga 22). As a result, Balram’s rise into the ranks of the entrepreneurial class in Bangalore depends not only on the death of his

immediate exploiter; it requires the severing of all ties to the kinship networks that in the novel cannibalize the poor.

The White Tiger, then, narrates the simultaneity of two acts of dissembling which correspond to these two acts of murders: one which bears a family relationship to drag, passing, and sly civility, which we associate with acts of resistance and survival (Balram's transformation into Ashok); and another that shares kinship with slumming, con games, and fraud, which we associate with acts of appropriation (the Halwai's transformation into a crypto-Brahmin). Necessarily, the novel uneasily straddles a contradiction: the narratives that sympathize with the dissimulation of the oppressed are indistinguishable from the narratives that luxuriate in the frauds of the rich. For instance, Balram's childhood hero, Vijay, does whatever it takes to break free of caste and become a bus conductor: "Vijay's family were pigherds, which meant they were the lowest of the low, yet he had made it up in life. Somehow he had befriended a politician. People said he had let the politician dip his beak in his backside. Whatever he had to do, he had done: he was the first entrepreneur I knew of" (Adiga 26). Vijay's enterprising escape from his caste-bound occupation is also an inverted narrative of the cruelty of political corruption and sexual predation of his superiors, now redeemed by virtue of lifting Vijay up by his own bootstraps. The collapse of these two narratives into one another is accomplished only through the fantasy of the end of caste itself, a fantasy that differently belongs to both the Dalit and the high-caste.

In *The White Tiger*, the libertarian and the liberationist politics of poverty alleviation exist side-by-side in an uneasy equilibrium. Balram's explanation of how he has risen from the extraordinary poverty of "the Darkness" to become a member of India's rising class of "social entrepreneurs" who will help to build "a new Bangalore for a new India" rests on yet another critique of caste (Adiga 273). The novel's central metaphor—what Adiga calls the "rooster coop"—is the notion that the rich are able to control the vast mass of the poor through a regime of terror:

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 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. (Adiga 147)

A similar strategy of social control is used, Balram argues, to ensure that the poor never rise against their masters, primarily through the exercise of physical coercion and threats of violence to members of one's family. This

method of social control is so successful, Balram continues, that the poor will refuse the very keys to their freedom in favor of perpetual servitude:

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 . . . Every day millions wake up at dawn—stand in dirty, crowded buses—get off at their masters’ posh houses—and then clean the floors, wash the dishes, weed the garden, feed their children, press their feet—all for a pittance. (Adiga 149-50)

Comparing Adiga’s deployment of the “99.9 percent” to the “we are the 99 percent” of the Occupy Wall Street movement goes some way towards explaining how his term means the opposite of OWS’s. In Adiga’s formulation, membership in the “99.9 percent” is a mark not of social power through mass solidarity but of perpetual enslavement and ideological control through the concentration of wealth. Libertarianism’s disgust with collectivities, critique of solidarities, and philosophy of intense individualism all circulate in the claustrophobic metaphor. Later, as Balram grows increasingly dissatisfied with his master, there are rumors of Naxalite revolution:

Have you heard about the Naxals? . . . They’ve got guns. They’ve got a whole army. They’re getting stronger by the day . . . Just read the papers. The Chinese want a civil war in India, see? Chinese bombs are coming to Burma, and into Bangladesh, and then into Calcutta. They go down south into Andhra Pradesh, and up into the Darkness. When the time is right, all of India will . . . (Adiga 177)

The rumor traffics in much of the same paranoid feeling that the rest of the novel possesses, but here it offers up one alternative to the more radically individualized critique that Balram offers. If the novel imagines the strictures of capitalism to be so intense that no escape is imaginable, it also believes the vice of capitalism is so tight that a collective rebellion is imminent. Consequently, the choice of revolutionary imagery is also important: Naxalite armed struggle against the Indian state shares the novel’s fascination with and penchant for immediate violence and expropriation as its form of class warfare (as opposed to collective ownership, for example).

The novel’s preference, aesthetically and ideologically, is not for hybridity and improvisation; in fact, Balram seems to be critiquing his own educational past and his intellectual composition here in favor of a more formal education (which is the *telos* of the novel’s conclusion). His self-description is prompted by the class chauvinism of Balram’s master, Ashok Kumar, who proclaims: “The thing is, he probably has . . . what, two, three years of schooling him? He can read and write, but he doesn’t get what he’s read. He’s half-baked. The country is full of people like him, I’ll tell you that. And we entrust our glorious parliamentary democracy . . . to characters like these. *That’s* the whole tragedy of this

country” (Adiga 7). Even if the novel critiques Ashok’s chauvinism, Balram is forced to concede that “he is right” (Adiga 8); Balram spends the entire novel attempting to overcome his “half-baked” past. The resulting *Bildungsroman* consists of learning to behave more like the *petite* and *nouvelle* bourgeoisie: overhearing political discussions to understand corruption; pronouncing the names of middle-class commodities correctly; wearing better clothes; remembering not to scratch one’s crotch; drinking finer liquor; and sleeping with the right kinds (and colors) of women. If the novel’s final idiom appears both to be a failure and to be an improvised ensemble, it is at least in part the result of its main character’s chaotic education: one does not enter the world of the middle class, the novel reminds us, without certain important transformations. But in order for the novel to succeed, there has to be some remnant of Balram’s desperate past whose stickiness leaves a trace, or else the novel backslides into the con-game that it resents. That stickiness is caste.

Narratives of Capitalist Redemption and Caste Erasure

The problem with most of the critical approaches to the novel is that by dwelling overmuch on the problem of authenticity, something the novel wants to undermine and perpetuate at the same time, critics misunderstand the novel’s deep interest in and persistent anxiety about how acts of passing frustrate our ability to pin down and assign blame. In some of the most dramatic scenes of the novel, the plot turns on the problem of exposing the charades that people have attempted around Balram, of his being able to detect when and how the con has been managed. For instance, Balram secures his position as the chief driver for Ashok only after he exposes the previous driver as a Muslim pretending to be a Hindu; similarly, Balram is outraged to discover that the blonde-haired prostitute that he has just hired is in fact a dark-haired fraud using her dyed hair to attract better prices for her services. Later in the book, Balram also discovers that “he can turn his master’s car into a freelance taxi” when Ashok is not paying attention (Adiga 195). The ability to pass, or to slum, and the ability to detect the falsehoods, are both sites of guilty pleasure and perilous possibility in the novel; they depend on one another in important ways as the novel constructs its own maps that lead from poverty into wealth through a series of class masquerades and exposés. The novel’s verisimilitude skates on the edge of failed deception.

Verisimilitude and dissimulation are the modes in which the unreliable narrator normally operates, a kind of metonym for our own suspicious relationship to the world of late capitalism in which the commodity both is and is not itself (Moretti 142-8). The epistolary form of the novel that is interrupted by a variety of “texts”—police reports and posters, advertisements, price lists, political slogans, magazine covers, how-to manuals, carnival weight-and-fortune chits, and even other

letters—simultaneously hints at a real world outside the novel and suggests that reality is mere textuality. But in the same ways that a lack of access to English education is a marker of the authentically subaltern, class, too, is supposed to cling to the individual subject as some permanent feature of his/her identity, troped in the novel as the bestial nomenclature the main characters receive (“white tiger,” “boar,” “buffalo,” “stork,” etc.). The scandal that *The White Tiger* poses for the guardians of class privilege in India is just how easily the boundary between the classes can be traversed by routine violence.

But if class is easily overcome, caste historically has been more knotty. Part of the conceit of the novel is that distinctions based on caste are no longer meaningful in the whitewash of modern, urban anonymity. In explaining the condition of post-independence India, Balram claims:

And then, thanks to all those politicians in Delhi, 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. Those that were the most ferocious, the hungriest, had eaten everyone else up, and grown big bellies. That was all that counted now, the size of your belly. It didn’t matter whether you were a woman, or a Muslim, or an untouchable: anyone with a belly could rise up. My father’s father must have been a real Halwai, a sweet-maker, but when he inherited the shop, a member of some other caste must have stolen it from him with the help of the police. My father had not had the belly to fight back. That’s why he had fallen all the way to the mud, to the level of a rickshaw-puller. That’s why I was cheated out of my destiny to be fat, and creamy-skinned, and smiling.

To sum up—in the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies.

And only two destinies: eat—or get eaten up. (Adiga 54)

Ankhi Mukherjee contends that the pseudo-parenthetical, historical appositions are part of Anglophone fiction’s global brand. But there are other allusions that are subtly erased. If the opening up of the cages refers to the violence in the immediate aftermath of India’s “Partition,” then the combination of “a woman, or a Muslim, or an untouchable” is a way to smuggle in a critique of the politics of reservation in the wake of the Mandal Commission’s report and its implementation in 1989. In fact, the condensation of large swathes of Indian history in the breathless simplicity of declaring “there are just two castes” depends on ideology which sees the persistence of caste-based identity and politics as a relic from the past that needs only more modernity to erase. In place of the colonial “laws of the zoo,” Balram’s India has the meritocratic “laws of the jungle” where avaricious competition offers up freedom from the claustrophobia of caste-determined destinies.

That caste comes to dominate over religion and sex in this novel is important, too, as the debates around caste have become central to debates about corruption in India. Crucially, Adiga’s novel may be complicit in a more dangerous bait-and-switch: in reformulating the terms of class and caste to be interchangeable he succeeds in making the upper-caste

criticism of caste-based reservations the lower caste's critique of class inequality. This chiasmatic structure of the novel's critique of inequality is built into its exasperated representation of caste:

But if we were Halwais, then why was my father not making sweets but pulling a rickshaw? Why did I grow up breaking coals and wiping tables, instead of eating *gulab jamuns* and sweet pastries when and where I chose to? Why was I lean and dark and cunning, and not fat and creamy-skinned and smiling, like a boy raised on sweets would be? (Adiga 53)

Here, Balram does not produce a critique of caste as an occupational limit, but a critique of caste's ability to deliver economic advancement, an indictment, too, of how caste-based reservations have left middling castes like the Halwais behind. Rather than being a barrier to upward mobility, caste-based reservations have been crucial in securing upward mobility for a section of the low caste and the Dalits, an upward mobility that is regarded with extraordinary jealousy by members of the upper castes who chafe at their stagnating social positions and deteriorating social prerogatives. The ultimate con that the novel succeeds at is putting this critique of caste into the mouth of a sweet-maker's caste and pretending it is not a cruel joke; after all, in the discourse of anti-Mandal activists, upward mobility on the basis of caste is also disdainfully troped as "the creamy layer." The persistence of caste in the age of neoliberal austerity serves as a terrible warning against the fact that narratives of passing are also narratives of slumming in reverse, and the euphoria about having arrived at a post-casteist society is a marker of reaction and not a call to radical redistribution of the social provision.

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