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Language as a Means of Contradistinction Between the Centre and the Margin: A Post-Colonial Analysis of Aravind Adiga's *the White Tiger*

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***Abstract*-- Language is Aravind Adiga's distinctive vehicle in his Man Booker Prize Winner novel *The White Tiger* in exploring the conflicts between the centre and the margin, the upper caste and the lower caste, the privileged class and the underprivileged one prevalent in the post-colonial era in India. Adiga very unprecedentedly portrays in his novel the grim reality of contemporary India in which it is not only the socio-economic discrimination and political empowerment and disempowerment that bifurcate the society into two contradictory worlds. But rather the use of language as a means of social discourse makes a wide gulf of contradistinction between two groups of people. Whereas the marginal people use the colloquial language as a part of their discourse of insurrection and resistance against the oppression of the ruling centre, the authoritarian central forces simply excommunicate those marginalized groups that they find inhomogeneous to them from the perspective of linguistic *savoir-faire* and verbal elegance. My present paper aims to analyse in detail such contradictory dichotomies between two groups of people as a consequence of translucent linguistic division in contemporaneous society as delineated by Adiga in *The White Tiger*.**

***Keywords*-- Contradistinction, Dichotomy, Empowerment, Inhomogeneous, Insurrection, *Savoir-faire*.**

I. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's 2008 Man Booker Prize Winner novel *The White Tiger* speaks very vehemently of the oppositional forces of the two worlds in one country—the ruling master class and the subjugated servant class, the rich privileged group and the underprivileged section, the marginalized poor and the central elites. The authoritarian rich upper class/caste people exert their power of domination not merely in the socio-economic fields and the political domain but quite unflinchingly in the socio-linguistic realm as well. It is the medium of language by which the post-colonial masters aim to retain their power structure and arbitrary hegemonic system in the society. As P. D. Nimsarkar points out:

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 dialectical form of language displaying their social superiority/status in the hierarchical set up. The lower classes struggle to adjust and, at the same time, revolt with fire of intolerance. Language becomes a medium of fight with all sorts of warfare loaded with socio-linguistic consciousness. (89)

This seamy side of the socio-linguistic situation is very scathingly exposed by Adiga in his novel. As has been pointed out language is not an isolated and abstract idea separated from society. Language is a social phenomenon:

Our daily life takes us through a series of activities involving the use of language. We use several registers, styles, the spoken and written mode, depending on the situation. So, language must be studied as a human phenomenon and not just as a linguistic phenomenon unrelated to life and society. (Verma and Krishnaswamy 22)

Adiga, in his novel, has very adroitly uses the *lingua franca* which is distinctly related to the contemporary society in post-colonial India.

II. Content

Balram Halwai, the protagonist in *The White Tiger* uses language according to his socio-economic position in relation to the macrocosmic social injustice, economic disparity, and political corruption ubiquitous in contemporary India. Balram belongs to the marginalized section of society, and therefore is deprived of all the basic necessities of life, irrespective of having possessed great innate wisdom and a sense of individualism. He is marginalized not *per se*, but because of the authoritarianism and exploitation of the upper caste and class people in the society. As Binod Mishra notices:

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These characters are marginalized not because of their inability but because of their innocence and their utter neglect most often by the centre, the ruling class. (28)

Balram is, therefore, denied access to all the educational, social, economic, political and cultural developments in his life. He was a brilliant student in his elementary school in his village of Laxmangarh. But he had to discontinue his education because of their extreme poverty. Consequently, Balram became an uneducated fellow having been forced to work as a child labourer in a tea stall in his village. The language Balram uses for such servitude as tea boys in the poverty-ridden rural areas is very much commensurate with their present situation:

Go to a tea shop anywhere along the Ganga, sir, and look at the men working in that tea shop – men, I say, but better to call them human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still 'boys'. (WT 51)

Words and phrases like 'human spiders', 'crawling', 'crushed', 'sluggish' invariably are suggestive of the abject precariousness of the servant class. The servant class people also use such pejorative terms for each other, which very unambiguously indicate how inconsequential they are in their own life. The illiterate and pugnacious women in the village 'sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede' (21). Balram's poverty-stricken father considers himself to be 'a donkey' (30). The prostitutes, the other marginalized groups in the society, again are 'wares on offer' (58). The chauffeurs' gathering in the city is termed as 'the monkey-circle' (226), and the fellow poverty-ridden drivers call Balram 'Country-Mouse' (227). '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 literary expression is rejuvenated. The animal imagery is a part of the communicative strategy' (Nimsarkar 99).

While giving a language note on the eighteenth-century socio-linguistic situation, Carter and McRae refer to William Cobbett, the English farmer, journalist and writer who started his weekly newspaper entitled *The Political Register* in 1802 and became an MP in 1832:

He [Cobbett] often makes reference in his writings to the ways in which petitions to parliament (for voting reform) were dismissed by the government on account of the 'vulgarity' of language used by the petitioners. In the eighteenth century the language of the working classes was deemed not to conform to the standards of the grammar as described in the new standardized grammars of Bishop Lowth and others… linguistically 'inferior' language use was seen as a token of inferior thought and also of dubious moral value.

Such ideas about language were used to protect the government from criticism and to resist movements for political change. (203)

This factor is unequivocally relevant to the linguistic phenomenon in contemporaneous India, too. As Adiga portrays in his novel the upper class and caste people exclude the marginalized communities simply because of their vulgar vocabulary, inappropriate pronunciation and nonstandard syntax. Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam, Balram's employers think that his inferior language is a part of his uncouth manner, sordid physical appearance and abominable idiosyncrasy. He is most heartlessly ridiculed with hysterical giggles by the rich masters when he cannot properly utter the word 'mall': ''It's not *maal*, it's a mall,' he said. 'Say it again' (146). Balram is again utterly humiliated and caricatured both by Ashok and Pinky Madam when he cannot perfectly pronounce 'pizza':

'It's not piJJA. It's piZZa. Say it properly.'

'Wait – you're mispronouncing it too. There's a *T* in the middle. *Peet. Zah*.' (WT 154)

These incidents explicitly indicate that the upper-class elites always suppress the voices of the marginalized servants merely categorising them as nonstandard, vulgar and inferior in order to retain the systematic hegemony in the society without letting the underclass to emerge with any kind of rebellion against the authority.

The class and caste discrimination is very realistically represented by the author through the master-servant relationship and the maltreatment of the marginalized by the elites in the novel through the vehicle of language. Pinky Madam vituperatively calls Balram 'this yokel from the village' (119), Ramanathan, a fixer is called 'a sleazy, oily *cretin*' (121) by Ashok, and Balram time and again is given pejorative nomenclatures such as an 'idiot' (122) and a 'moron' (122) by Mukesh and other masters. 'The language is here a medium of power dominance, a marker of the social superiority whereby the sense of inferiority is implanted into the poor servants' psyche, perpetuating cultural conflict' (Nimsarkar 93).

Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd argues that in the post-independence era in India the Brahminical forces have occupied all the socio-economic, political, cultural, religious and educational positions quite subjugating the marginalized Dalitbahujan masses. In the post-colonial India, Shepherd claims, the upper caste Brahmins 'recast their Sanskritized life-style to anglicized life-styles, reshaping themselves, to live a semi-capitalist (and at the same time brahminical) life. Their anglicization did not undermine their casteized authoritarianism. All apex power centres in the country were brahminized and the power of the bureaucracy greatly extended' (51).

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It is therefore, Shepherd further argues, incumbent for the Dalitbahujans to de-casteize the society by overturning the hegemony through conscious Dalitbahujan movements. As such, not only the power centres which have been appropriated by the elites with their Sanskritized and Anglicized discourse, but also the very written texts—hitherto manipulated by the upper caste and class people—should entirely be re-evaluated. Ilaiah Shepherd therefore proposes:

In order to dalitize society and de-Hinduize it thoroughly, every word and every sentence that has been written by brahminical thinkers, writers, politicians, historians, poets and art critics—virtually everything in every field—must be reexamined thoroughly. (130)

Balram Halwai, the lower caste and lower class marginalized man seems to concur with the proposition of Shepherd when he also wants to re-write the history of his downtrodden class by revolting against the established systems in the society through his violent resistance. Balram very sagaciously realizes that no revolution is coming from outside, but rather 'Every man must make his own Benaras' (304) as was done in the global history by stalwarts like Alexander, Abraham Lincoln, Mao Zedong and others. Balram undoubtedly speaks of re-examining and re-writing history when he asseverates: 'The book of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly, young Indian. Crap it out, and read' (304).

The marginalized groups definitely find ways to make insurrectionary movements against the rich ruling class by using their own discourse against them. The dominating and exploitative landlords in Balram's village are given nomenclatures according to their bestial characteristics. They are called the Buffalo, the Stork, the Raven and the Wild Boar by the poverty-stricken villagers as they have tolerated their exploitation in different fields. Similarly, in the town the rich employer like Mr Mukesh is also identified as the Mongoose because of his predatory nature. Therefore, 'each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him' (24). In the same way almost all other men and women in the society are associated with the animals in the jungle. The common people who are socio-economically exploited by the rich are named after the animals that are also victimized by the wild ferocity of powerful animals. Thus, Balram and other members of the village are called monkey, donkey, spider, dog, horse, buffalo, rooster, chicken and so on. This animal imagery is indubitably a part of the *lingua franca* of the novel that raises many questions about the human nature in postmodern era in India. As Savita Singh points out:

The novel raises many questions on modern India. The animal imagery brings forth the animal qualities in men: hunger and greed, ruthless selfishness, uncontrolled violence, impure thoughts and mean intentions, lack of an active conscience and so on. Men have become like animals in this world. The scathing expletives that Adiga hurls out through this imagery is meant to shock us into introspection. The time has come for a complete overhauling of the system. Men are fuming and angry at their own condition and degeneration. In science and technology, man is forging ahead, but as moral rational human beings, we are sliding down the evolutionary ladder. Are we not going backwards towards becoming apes, where sex, food, caves (houses) are our only concerns? (157)

Balram learns all the abusive languages so as to hurl vulgar words at his masters in more pungent ways. The upper-class masters use their own lingo and specialized jargon to express their disgust towards the servant class, which in turn trains the servants to use the same kinds of vulgar expressions to rebel against them. In this regard Kar and Nimsarkar opine:

The obscene words, known as abuses, are actually tabooed, but to add colloquialism, the author has shown how servants were treated by their masters. The abuses are spontaneous overflow of anger, irritation and hatred, so they show the relationship between the upper and the lower strata of the characters. This aggravates the feeling of rebel later in the protagonist. (165)

Sudhir K. Arora compares Balram with Shakespeare's Caliban in *The Tempest* and argues that Balram's abusive discourse is meant only to resist against his master class domination and English-speaking white people of the West. Arora writes:

Caliban decides to make more Calibans in order to oppose Prosperos and their white beauties. The white tigers have learnt English language not as a part of slavery but as a part of reaction to abuse the West in the same language. (68)

Thus, Balram's learning English is a part of the process of violent decolonisation and rebellious insurrection.

III. Conclusion

To conclude, it has been noticed that language is a vehement force to make a chasm of differences between two conflicting groups in the contemporary society. The elites have many means to assert their identity such as rich life-style, wealth, influence, socio-political dominance and their own specific language. But the underclass people are devoid of any identity because they have nothing powerful.

Consequently, it is only language, specifically abusive language, which is the only recourse for the marginalized to assert their existence. As very appropriately summed up by Nimsarkar:

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 signalling 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. (103)

Thus, it is very conspicuously portrayed by the author in his post-colonial novel *The White Tiger* that language is a vehement force to make a chasm of differences between the two conflicting groups in the contemporary post-colonial society in India, the centre and the margin, the privileged class and the underprivileged one.

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