

Subaltern Voices in Twenty First Century Indian Fiction : A Study of *The Inheritance of Loss* and *The White Tiger*

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First published in the journal *Wedgse* (1985) and then in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (1988) Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", reads in juxtaposition the radical claims of twentieth century French intellectuals like Foucault and Deleuze to speak for the disenfranchised and the claims of the British colonialism to rescue native widows from the practice of self-immolation in nineteenth century India. This Spivak did to bring into light the paradoxical fact that how a kind intellectual impulse to represent the disempowered groups effectively appropriate the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them. Stephen Morton reads the fact and unearths "how the benevolent, radical western intellectual can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experiences in the same way that the benevolent colonialist silenced the voice of the widow who chooses to die on her husband's funeral pyre."¹ One of many objectives of the paper, therefore, is to bring forth the subaltern voices being crushed by the privileged groups (mentally and economically) of society. The paper seeks to compare and contrast the ways Kiran Desai and Aravind Adiga adopted in their Booker winning novels to represent the voices of the disempowered; it has also been attempted to point out whether they adopt the same way to display the voices of the subaltern or differ in their perspectives? The present paper dares to challenge Spivak's qualm "that the postcolonial historians can recover the standpoint of the subaltern"², and attempts to find out

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a ground which Adiga's and Desai's subaltern protagonists seek for. The present study also tries to assess whether subalterns are capable of breaking the ice or they still need call some of their privileged brothers or sisters to do the job for them. If yes, how they break the silence forms one among the major interests of the paper. Do the authors of the novels adopt the same stand to forward their views or they differ in their standpoints, is also an objective of the present study. Since Kiran Desai stands first in chronology, it will be profitable to discuss her views first.

In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Kiran Desai gives the impression to have found out the subaltern voices either in dreams or in unconscious. She appears to have sought the suppressed voices of the disempowered groups of society either in their frustrated mutterings or in fear of losing life or livelihood. It may be seen either in loneliness or nostalgic remembrance of the past. In *The Inheritance of Loss*, Desai narrates the story of three persons: Jemubhai, the judge, the Cook and his son, Biju who is also a cook in America.

Jemubhai is the first person in the novel who represents the subaltern in a foreign land. He is marginalized, humiliated, detested and depressed everywhere and all the time. He tries to speak but could not dare to utter a single word; and all his feelings came as his frustration and depression. Jemubhai's humiliation starts from his expedition to Cambridge for education to his becoming an ICS officer. He could hardly express his experience; it came only through his frustrations. On being ostracized by his cabin mate for his meal given by his mother, he could not restrain his frustration. The novelist depicts his mental condition in such words:

"No fruit dies so vile and offensive a death as a banana, but it had been packed just in case. In case of *what?* Jemu shouted silently to his mother.... He was furious that his mother had considered the possibility of his humiliation In her attempt to conceal out one humiliation, she had only succeeded in adding another."²³

He went to London that he thought a "Land of Hope and Glory". But he could not find even a room and sufficient food from his landlady to slake the fire of hunger. He wanted to voice his thought but could not; and once again his voice comes choked in his nostalgic recollections of past: "After a spate of nights lying awake listening to the borborygmus of his half- empty stomach, thinking tearfully of his family in Piphit who thought him as worthy of a hot dinner as the queen of England...."⁴ In his college, nobody spoke to him, in bus and other public places, no one liked to sit beside him and showed the indignation towards him for being there. As a result, he forgot to laugh, "could barely manage to lift his lips in a smile, and if he ever did, he held his hand over his mouth, because he couldn't bear anyone to see his gums, his teeth."⁵

The only thing Jemubhi could do to prove his erudition and get success is to work hard. He worked eighteen hours a day, over a hundred hours a week. He sits in the "Open Competitive Examination" and clears the written test. But again he could not impress the white examiners in vive- voce because he could not be able to break the construction of his race, ethnicity, and skin colour. His examiners chuckled at his peculiar native accent and pronunciation. The novelist describes the why Jemubhai could not impress the examiners: "By the time they stood for the ICS, most of the candidates had crisp-ironed their speech, but Jemubhai had barely opened his mouth for whole years and his English still had the rhythm and form of Gujrati."⁶ The result comes, but he could not secure his name in the merit. He got selection only in the second list which was to Indianize the service. Jemubhai could not stop from shedding tears. He weeps because his intelligent is declared his shortcoming. He weeps because he could impress one only through his pen and not his face and voice because no one likes to hear him; and once again his feelings could get their outlet in his tears which no one but he could listen and understand.

Similarly, the cook is another subaltern character who becomes the novelist's spokesman. The cook shows that the voice of a subaltern can only be expressed in unconscious. Jemubhi, the judge hires him when he was a child. Since then, he served the judge with full sense of honesty, truthfulness, devotion and commitment. But the judge who is his master and patron shows no care for him and humiliates him for a dog. The cook is socked at the judge's behavior and his humiliation by the latter. His honesty, his duty, his sense of devotion towards his master and his many years service done to him, all is exterminated. He loses his self respect and is humiliated for a dog. He, out of perturbation, drinks wine, becomes intoxicated and comes to the judge in keif. He knows that he has never been a bit careless in the whole pursuit of his life. He has been fond of Mutt, the dog, has taken her for walks, made toast for her, breakfast with an egg in wintertime, made her stew, called her "Muttu, Ishtu, Ishtoo." Now his guilt begins to grow. Various thoughts strike to his mind at the same time. Had he indeed been negligent? He has failed in his duty, hadn't he? He comes to the judge filled with guilt and remorse. His remorse and sense of guilt displays the picture vividly. Now he speaks, he speaks the subaltern voice in unconscious:

I have been bad.... I've been drinking I ate the same rice as you not the servant's rice but the Dehradoon rice I ate the meat and lied I ate out of the same pot I stole liquor from the army I made chhang I did the accounts differently for years I have cheated in the accounts each and every day my money was dirty it was false sometimes I kicked Mutt I didn't take her for walks just sat by the side of road smoked a bidi and came home I'm, a bad man....⁷

And thus, his voice is suppressed under his intoxication and the beating of the judge. Here it is important to note that a subaltern voice can only be heard in unconscious, dreams, and frustrations.

The same story is repeated with the cook's son, Biju. Biju is a

subaltern who bears the lot of both, his father and the judge. He is a cook in America, bearing all the racial and ethnic discriminations. He is exploited everywhere; and no one likes him. If he leaves one restaurant and joins other, his works increase and has to perform now more duty than earlier. He wants to protests but cannot because he won't be heard; nor does he have any voice also. He could express his experience only through his tearful recollections of childhood that he spent with his uncle. His feelings get expressed only in unsaid dreams.

Kiran Desai, therefore, seems to have searched the subaltern voices in dreams, unexpressed desires, nostalgic recollections of past, unconscious mind, complexes, frustrations and depressions. It was not that, as Desai seems to give the impression, subalterns don't have voice, or they don't want to give voice their feelings, or they did not try; the fact is that, whenever they try, their voice is either crushed under physical violence or the feelings of disgust and humiliation.

Unlike Desai, Aravind Adiga seems to have adopted a different way to explore the voice of the disempowered sections of society. Adiga's *The White Tiger* seeks succinctly reveal India: India from village to city, from darkness to light, from past to the present and from the deprived to the privileged. It depicts the plight and predicament of most of the Indian subalterns who come from village to city. Aravind Adiga states in an interview: "I tried to tell a very real story about India on the brink of unrest. I tried to challenge the assumptions that many in middle class India hold about the poor: that they are stupid, easily manipulated, excessively bound by caste and family."⁸

The novel starts with Balram Halwai's plight who is a subaltern and becomes able to break the "Rooster Coop" and produce the subaltern voice. The novelist states that the saga of the plight of the poor can be known through the marks of the whips and cuts on their body. They cast seeds, cut weeds, harvest corn and paddy for the privileged sections

of the society; but they are devalued and thrown as chaff is separated from the grain. Balram's father yells out of pain the subaltern voice: "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."⁹ Here, this is not important that Adiga pointed out the subaltern voice, the significant point is that no one heard him. Similarly, Balram goes to school to usurp his right, but he schooling is discontinued and he is sold to the landlord of the village so that the heavy loan taken from him on his cousin's marriage could be given. After this, he has to work on a sweets' shop; there he can only hear the costumers talking and ordering, but he cannot speak. At last, anyhow he learns how to drive a car and searches a job at his landlord's household. Here, the novelist depicts the plight of a subaltern servant in India; how brutally and inhumanly they are treated by masters on very minor mistakes and incidents. On being stolen a son of Buffalo, they suspected the involvement of one of his servants in the act. They tortured the servant like anything and then shot him dead, killed his brother while working in the field, raped his sister and mother and then killed them and finally set his house fire. The reward a servant gets if something wrong happens with his master's family. His innocence is considered a crime, his denial from accepting the charged crime his insolence, and his fear of not facing his master's wrath, his skulking. The novelist states: "I don't know how you organize servants in China. But in India or at in the darkness-the rich don't have drivers, cooks, barbers and tailors. They simply have servants."¹⁰ Balram does not only drive his master's car, but he has also to sweep the floor of the courtyard, make tea, and clean cobwebs.

Adiga has also demonstrated how a subaltern is made silent and sacrifice his life for the welfare of his master. Once Pinky Ma'am got over drunk and ran the car into a child late at night; the child was dead. On being asked, Balram tells how these people in Darkness live: "they have eight, nine, ten children- sometimes they don't know the names

of their own children. Her parents- if they are even in Delhi ...- won't go to the police."¹¹ This is how a subaltern child is brought up in a poor Indian family. If the child defeats and survives the accidental death and fetal diseases; this is only a chance; he is more unfortunate to bear the misfortunes of life like Balram, the driver. Pinky Madam hit the child, but now Balram is there to take all the charges on himself for he is an obedient and loyal servant to his master. With some of the polite words, Balram is shown the legal documents to sign which he reads with shaking hands:

I, Balram Halwai, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxamangarh village in the district of Gata, do make the following statement of my own free will and intention: That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person or objects, on the night of January 23rd this year. That I then panicked and to fulfill my obligations to the injured party or parties by taking them to the nearest hospital emergency ward. That there were no other occupants of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened....¹²

Balram is compelled to take his mistress' crime on himself. He sates, he is not the only person to suffer in this way, but the jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are "there behind the bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid, middle-class masters. We left the village but masters still own us, body, soul and ares."¹³ This is how, according to the novelist, a subaltern is made voiceless and speechless. This is how he is made to suffer and not allowed to speak. He cannot avoid the misfortune. The narrator of the novel says: "I was in terror, and yet not once did the thought of running away cross my mind. Not once did the thought, I'll tell the judge the truth, cross my mind. I was trapped in the Rooster Coop."¹⁴ The novelist represents the plight of the subaltern through the metaphor of the Rooster Coop. Roosters see their rooster brothers being slaughtered by the butcher;

and they are conscious that they stand next in number to be slain. Yet they do not rebel and they make no venture to get out of the coop.

Balram Halwvai, the narrator, attempts to break the coop and is ready to pay anything for that. He murders his master, Ashok, takes his money and runs away with his nephew, Dharm, knowing that rest of his family members will be tortured to death like a beast. He goes to Bangalore and starts a business with his master's money; joins the corrupt system. But he has evolved some of rules his own. He does not treat his subordinates like servants; he does not insult them; he does not make them his friends either because friends are too dangerous. He says that people may be seen talking of revolution in India; but in this country no revolution will take place because no one will dare to initiate and break the rooster coop. He muses that if he is arrested and tortured like anything in jail, he will never say that he had made any mistake that night in Delhi when he silt his master's throat. Rather he will sat, "it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant."¹⁵

In the conclusion of the study, it may be summarized that Kiran Desai ventured to trace the subaltern voices in dreams, crushed desires, unconscious mind and class and racial discrimination. But she did not make her subaltern heroes to break the rooster coop. Adiga, on the other side, not only finds out the suppressed voices of the disempowered groups of society, but also lets his hero break the rooster coop and butcher the butcher himself. It is noteworthy that Balram speaks throughout the novel and all of us listen to him. Whereas Kiran Desai's protagonist dares to break the silence in an intoxicated state of mind, Aravind Adiga's hero is cognizant when he speaks. Above all significant is the point that Balram speaks subaltern voice not as a subaltern but as a leading figure of the privileged section of society,

as a prominent capitalist and an entrepreneur of Indian industry. However, the whole story is full of subaltern voices, feelings, experiences, sentiments and plight and predicament.

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