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Denouncing Hegemonic Patterns in *The White Tiger*



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ABSTRACT

*Dominance in any form is a refutable phenomenon. It takes courage and irrepressible will to reject a system that has roots spread in bygone ages. Amongst many scholars, philosophers and thinkers, Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci are the stalwarts who identified the phenomenon of dominance in terms of base structure, superstructure, class conflict and hegemony. Their observation and formulation of breaking the dominance have carved ways for liberations from 'cultural hegemony'. In this respect, the present research paper aims at uncovering the hegemonic patterns prevailing in caste and class dominated Indian society. Balaram, the protagonist in the novel *The White Tiger* is murders his master and assumes entrepreneurship and writes his diary as a confession of his crime. Thus, the paper explores the undercurrents of hegemonic patterns which compel 'common man' to survive under the weight of notion of bondage slavery, loyalty and faithfulness towards masters in caste system.*

KEYWORDS

*Hegemony, Dominance, Loyalty, cultural hegemony, *The White Tiger*, Rebel.*

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

Down the ages human history is full of battles and rebels against dominant forces in terms of kingdom, religious atrocities and caste conflicts in every one or the age. The dominant forces used armies, polity, cultures and intellectual enterprises under the patronage of royal families, noble or feudal classes. It is, of late, on account of Renaissance, Humanism and Enlightenment movement in western academic institutions', the scholars, academicians stated focusing on the disguised patterns of exploitations of human resources. Karl Marx was the first among the first thinkers who brought to the light the economic base that enabled dominant forces, during industrial revolution, to manipulate every aspect of material life. Further, he sought out reasons for conflict between 'have' and 'have nots' in terms of bourgeoisie and proletariat. Taking his ideas further, Antony Gramsci deplored over strategies employed by bourgeoisie class to promote their ideas. It is not the army or its armory that controlled the masses but the way proletariat are convinced to be in the situation they are, so that they shouldn't rebel against the dominance. In this respect the present research articles undertakes an attempt to reveal the hegemonic patterns and rejection by the protagonist in the novel *The White Tiger* by ArvindAdiga.

Hegemony

The concept of 'hegemony' is related to power or dominance that one social group hold others. As Straubhaar opined it can be 'asymmetrical interdependence' of political-economic-cultural relations between and amongst nation-states.' (Straubhaar, 1991) or the difference between and among social classes within a nation. Hegemony is 'dominance and subordination in the field of relations structured by power" (Hall, 1985). Hegemony is more than just differences and among classes. It is a method for gaining and maintaining power.

Classical Marxist theory, as noted above, focuses on economic status as the major predictor of social differences. In twenty first century too, a century later Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels theorized the class differences that explain exploitation of the working classes, economic disparities, the patter of exploitation is underling the social inequalities in industrialized societies. Further, the technological development have made the social domination more complex than ever before. Rich and poor class differences are not directly or indirectly

influenced by economic factors. Ideological effect is playing crucial role in maintaining social power.

The term 'hegemony' is first used by Antonio Gramsci referring the maintenance of dominant over other classes. He broadened materialist Marxist theory into the realm of ideology. He came up with the term after contemplations over fascist government persecuted him for promoting Communist ideology in the year 1926 in Italy. Gramsci emphasized society's "superstructure," its ideology-producing institutions, in struggles over meaning and power. According to Gramsci, the ideological hegemony uses media tools to perpetuate their power, wealth and status by their own philosophy, culture and morality"(Boggs, 1976:39).

Hegemony is not a direct stimulation of thought or action, but, according to Stuart Hall, is a "framing [of] all competing definitions of reality within [the dominant class's] range bringing all alternatives within their horizons of thought. [The dominant class] sets the limits-mental and structural within which subordinate classes 'live' and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them" (1977: 333).

Hegemony implies a willing agreement by people to be governed by principles, rules, and laws they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not. Social consent can be a more effective means of control than coercion or force. Again, Raymond Williams: "The idea of hegemony, in its wide sense, is ... especially important in secretes [where] electoral politics and public opinion are significant factors, and in which social practice is seen to depend on consent to certain dominant ideas which in fact express the needs of a dominant class" (1976: 145). Thus, in the words of Colombian communication theorist Jesus Martin-Barbero, "one class exercises hegemony to the extent that the dominating class has interests which the subaltern classes recognize as being in some degree their interests too" (1993: 74).

Counter-hegemonic tendencies do not inhere solely in texts. They are formulated in processes of communication-in the interpretations, social circulation, and uses of media content. As with the American soldiers' use of military gas masks as inhaling devices to heighten the effect of marijuana smoke, or the homeless's transformation of supermarket shopping carts into personal storage vehicles, ideological resistance and appropriation frequently involve reinventing institutional messages for purposes that differ greatly from their creators' intentions. Expressions

of the dominant ideology are sometimes reformulated to assert alternative, often completely resistant or contradictory messages.

Furthermore, resistance to hegemony is not initiated solely by media consumers. Texts themselves are implicated. Ideology can never be stated purely and simply. Ways of thinking are always reflexive and embedded in a complex, sometimes contradictory, ideological regressAudience interpretations and uses of media imagery also eat away at hegemony. Hegemony fails when dominant ideology is weaker than social resistance. Gay subcultures, feminist organizations, environmental groups, radical political parties, music-based formations such as punks, B-boys, Rastafarians, and metal heads all use media and their social networks to endorse counter-hegemonic values and lifestyles. Indeed, we have only just begun to examine the complex relationship between ideological representation and social action.

Hegemonic Patterns in *The White Tiger*

Hegemony refers to carrying out dominance over classes by acquiring consent of subjects. In Indian context, hegemonic patterns came up owing to caste system. It plays an authoritarian role in dominating lower classes. Every upper caste and sub-caste in the hierarchy of caste system, dominates through religious sanctions. Religious sanctions boost hegemonic ideology in India. The religious sanctity for dominance of upper caste is propelled by feudal system rampant in rural areas.

Arvind Adiga the writer of novel *The White Tiger*, highlights breaking of hegemonic patterns. First, the novel *The White Tiger* depicts pattern of feudal system that forced many lower caste people leave rural areas and settle in cosmopolitan cities like Dhanabad, New Delhi, and Bengaluru. They prefer to settle in slum areas instead of leading a life of subjugation under feudal lords. Second, apparent master and slave relationship between Ashok and Balram. Balram meets his former feudal lord in City and works on the same pattern of bonded labourers. As his aspirations grow, he decides to reject the relationship; and murders his master. Third, Balram's remarks about Hanumana, and all the thirty six crores Gods points at discriminatory practices rampant under religious notions that support the widening rich and power divide. This dividethwarts lower class aspirants to achieve a settled livelihood in contemporary society. Before, deliberating over the implications of his rejections, it is worthwhile to discuss the narrative and the writer's intentions.

The White Tiger, the debut novel by Indian author Arvind Adiga, was first published in 2008 and won the Man Booker Prize in the same year. The novel provides a dark comical view of modern day life in India through the narration of Balram Halwai, the main character. The overall main theme of the novel is the contrast between India's rise as a modern global economy and the working class people who live in crushing rural poverty. Other themes touched on include corruption endemic to Indian society and politics familial loyalty versus independence, religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims, and the experience of returning to India after living in America, globalization, and the tensions between India and China as superpower countries in Asia.

Rejection of Feudal System

The protagonist of the Adiga's novel, Balram lived in the village of Laxmangarh, a fictional village in Bihar. The village is depicted as a community deep in the 'Darkness' of rural India. The feudal system was still active in villages. Balram's father was a rickshaw-puller. His family is too poor for him to be able to finish school. Despite being clever and being promised a scholarship, Balram instead is forced to work in a teashop, breaking coals and wiping tables in Dhanbad. Balram cannot bear the feudal pressures experienced by his relatives. He takes decision to leave the village and moves to city despite uncertainty of job. He learns driving as a mark of break from feudal system.

Driver to 'Stork': An act of Rejection of Bonded labourers' Mentality

In Dhanbad, he learns to drive car after learning about the high salary paid to drivers. Balram gets his break when a rich man from his village, known as 'The Stork' hires him as a chauffeur. Balram then drives for The Stork's son, who lives in the city of New Delhi. The city is a revelation and eye opening experience for Balram. As he drives his master and his wife to shopping malls and call centres, Balram becomes increasingly aware of immense wealth and opportunity all around him, while knowing that he will never be able to gain access to that world. Through these experiences, Balram learns much about the world and later states that the streets of India provided him with all the education he needed. The metaphor 'The Stork' indicates his rejection of the feudal lords in village. Out of penury he, like other villagers, has to leave village and search employment in urban area. To survive in urban area he acquires the art of driving. He has to drive the same feudal lords in city too. Balram wanted to break the new pattern of feudalism. Being a worker, he realized his economic and social limitations. Realization of

limitations marks a sea change in his attitude towards the masters. It instigates his rebellious nature. He secretly plans to break through the age old feudal system.

Murder of Master: An approach to terminate the relationship Master and Slave Relationship

Having recently returned from a stint in America, Ashok, one of the Stork's sons, is conflicted by the corruption and harshness of life in India. He also has to deal with his family's unhappiness for marrying his current wife, Pinky Madam, as the two of them married in the US, not in India, which causes them to lose respect in the caste system. Ashok's father also did not approve of the marriage because Pinky Madam is of another caste. As Balram broods over his situation, he realizes that there is only one way he could become part of this glamorous new India – to murder his employer, Ashok, and escape from servitude. However, Ashok's participation in funding political corruption leads to his liberal and free thinking spirit's demise and gives Balram a chance to become an entrepreneur. One day as Ashok is carrying seven hundred thousand rupees in cash as money bribes for politicians in New Delhi, Balram decides to murder him. The murder is a success as Ashok's throat is lashed, propelling Balram to flee to Bangalore with his nephew Dharam. With the seven hundred thousand rupees he stole, Balram creates his own taxi company and changes his name to Ashok Sharma. Thus he becomes a wealthy entrepreneur in India's new technological society and emerges as a part of the top caste in the Indian society of the Light, namely the world belonging to rich people who live in large urbanized cities.

Throughout the novel it is evident that Balaram thoughtfully rejects hegemonic patterns of caste system by settling out in new cities; his comments about religious notions marks sharp detachment from gods and deities; and finally he develops into a rich man by violence. Right from the beginning he is writing diary and confesses his crime. But the notions at the story ooze with a sense of what it must be like for a young person growing up in a modern Indian Village with no familial support or economic means to make it in life. The main character is an intelligent and literate young man, who was born an outcast but has miraculously risen to become a rich man's driver in the capital city of Delhi.

Balaram: As an Organic Intellectual

According to Antonio Gramsci, "The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of the intellectual activity that exists in everyone at a certain degree of development, modifying its relationship with the muscular-nervous effort

towards a new equilibrium, and ensuring that the muscular-nervous effort itself, in so far as it is an element of a general practical activity, which is perpetually innovating the physical and social world, becomes the foundation of a new and integral conception of the world. (Gramsci, 09) The intellectuals, who turn out to excel from deprivation and achieve higher status than their previous working life, are supposed to work for equilibrium among traditional intellectuals and workers.

Applying the apparatus of hegemony in the context of *The White Tiger*, it is evident that the tone of the narrative is sardonic. The main character, Balarama mocks at feudal lords by refereeing them as 'Stork'- derogatory term for the masters who are notoriously known for exploiting the peasants and common public for personal interest. Feudal lords were responsible for poverty in rural areas. They were the dominant groups who controlled capital resources as well as agriculture land on which the farmers and common public was forced to survive as a bondage labourers.

Similarly, Balaram criticizes the religious notions in India. He points out, commenting upon the role played by gods and deities for not reliving from poverty. He also makes fun of slave mentality of peasants in Indian society by referring to Hanuman as the greatest slave. Thus, he reveals the agreement and consent between dominant class and lower classes. Thus, he rejects the hegemonic pattern of suppression in the guise of deities. It implies from his interpretation of religious notions that religious practices are used to dominate the masses. Balaram assumes role of thinker who points out the disguised forms of exploitation. Quotes with approval the Urdu poet Iqbal, who said, : "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world" Perhaps that line, and the novel, serves as a manifesto for the sort of writing that the new India needs but isn't getting enough of.

In New Delhi, Balaram works as a driver for Ashok Sharma. Following the pattern of loyalty towards masters, he obeys his master. At a point he displays such a deep loyalty that he accepts the blame of killing a passerby under his car when Ashok Sharma's wife actually had committed the sin. Having spent most of the time with Ashok, he learns how the corporate system works in metropolitan cities. Fed up with corrupt practices he gathers courage to murder Ashok, his master and run away to Bengaluru. At Bengaluru he assumes a new name and confesses his crime in the diary. The murder of Ashok, the erstwhile feudal lord's son implies denouncement of social, corrupt practices. He assumes the ownership of a travel agency.

Conditions that compel Balram to murder his boss seem justifiable as the novel gives a bleak enough picture of poverty thus, it makes 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.

Conclusion

As portrayed in the novel, India 'limps, coughs splutters and throws up a good deal of blood. One of every six Indians continues to live in the shadow of insurgency. Farmers with little access to irrigation and devastated by failing crops continue to kill themselves. And nearly 300 million Indians remain unsure of where their next meal will come from. ArvindAdiga's riveting, razor-sharp debut novel explores with wit and insight the realities of these two India's, and reveals what happens when the inhabitants of one collude and then collide with those of the other. The novel has taken a lot of flack because it doesn't paint India in very favourable light Author ArvindAdiga has been steadfast in his portrayal of his India. To justify it he says that if this is the

way India is, then why try to hide the truth? We should not take this novel as an attack on the country; it's actually about the greater process of self-examination.

In other words gridlocked in corruption, greed, inhumanity and absolute inequality – of class, caste, wealth, religion – this India is unredemptive. The White Tiger is an excoriating piece of work, stripping away the veneer of Indian Rising. Adiga speaks for the millions of underprivileged downtrodden people and gives them a voice through literature.

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