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THE SMASHING PSYCHE OF SOCIETY: AN INTERPRETATION OF STRAIN THEORY IN
ARAVIND ADIGA'S NOVEL, *THE WHITE TIGER*

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Abstract

Strain theory in sociology is interpreted as the pressure derived from social factors such as the lack of income or the lack of quality education which leads individuals to commit suicide or crime. The protagonist of the novel *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai, is portrayed as an untouchable, marginalized, dehumanized and oppressed person. When he faced humiliation in society, he simply neglects his professional ethics and commits the crime. As Balram grows up, he becomes aware of class relations, authority, the feudal system and the power equation rampant in the society. Being poor, unemployed and discriminated against leads to his exclusion from economic, social and political life. The varied experiences in his personal and social life of domination, segregation, vulnerability and discrimination resulted in the feeling of marginalization. Marginalization leads to the feeling of alienation. The alienated person is powerless to guess future outcomes of behaviour. Thus, the marginalized psyche is distinguished by distortion, marginalization, otherness and difference. Balram Halwai, the unreliable yet genuine protagonist, insists on the right to basic human dignity for all Indians. Through his attempts to escape the "rooster coop," he becomes the example that all Indians should strive to emulate.

Keywords: Aravind Adiga, the White Tiger, Strain Theory, Balram Halwai, Munna, Ashok.

In society, people have to face so many complicated issues concerning their sex, creed, caste, colour, physicality and financial stability. All these issues and problems in society come under the roof of strain theory. Strain theory in sociology is interpreted as the pressure derived from social factors such as the lack of income or the lack of quality education which leads individuals to commit suicide or crime. The ideas relating to strain theory were first introduced in the 1930s by American

Sociologist Robert K Merton. Strain theory states that social structures within society may pressurize citizens to commit a crime. Classic strain theories focused primarily on disadvantaged groups, wherein common aspirations and the inability to achieve the goals were considered a driving force behind every crime. Individuals whose incomes placed them below the poverty threshold were unable to realize common, socially accepted ambitions through legal means, and thus they were forced to take a path of

criminal behaviour to achieve their goals. Those theories were later reformulated, most prominently by American criminologists Robert Agnew, Steven F. Messner and Richard Rosenfeld.

Agnew's work was about the general situations in strain theory, which addressed weaknesses in earlier strain theories, including inadequate explanations for middle-class delinquency and inconsistencies between aspirations and expectations for fulfilling them. Key components of general strain theory included its consideration of the role of emotion in strain-derived crime and its consideration of a broad range of possible sources of societal pressure that might cause a person to commit a crime.

Strain theory is developed in the field of Sociology and Criminology after the 1950s. This theory deals with the life of individuals who commit crimes from societal pressure to achieve high standards of living. Strain theory was developed in 1957 by Robert K. Merton. It is a theory related to Sociology and Criminology. Durkheim defined anomie to explain the concentration of criminal behaviour at the end of the nineteenth century. Then, Merton redefined Durkheim's anomie to strain by applying it to modern industrial societies.

Strain theory studies the inclination of individuals to commit suicide or crime because of their background in society which is biased and filled with complex structures. The application of the Strain theory is quite possible in post-modern literature because only the post-modern literature sanctions liberal ethics. The protagonist of the novel *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai, is portrayed as an untouchable, marginalized, dehumanized and oppressed person. When he faced such humiliation in society, he simply neglects his professional ethics; he is not loyal to his master and commits the crime. He is the victim of Indian Apartheid. He is the eponymous 'White Tiger' of the text. The novel depicts his boundary from darkness to light, from Laxmangarh to Delhi and Bangalore, and in the progression, traces his hunt for identity, from a 'Country Mouse' to a 'White Tiger'. There are many such Munnas or Balrams and Ashok spread all over the country.

Strain theory is most applicable to the lower class, as they struggle with limited resources to obtain their goals. Here Balram Halwai is a victim of extreme poverty. The dominant high culture of the elite class is always suppressing the lower one. He is a misfit in the wealthy and powerful Indian elite society. Balram's whole life is a struggle. He wants to raise his position from the low rank to the high rank, where he would be called a 'big-bellied man'. In the novel, *The White Tiger*, we could see that four landlords, who possess animal traits and own almost everything, make the villager's life miserable with heavy debts. Thus, Adiga portrayed the so-called system of an Indian village which favoured slavery and promote slavish tendencies among the poor people. The outcastes and Harijans are ill-treated in most of the part of Indian villages. Under the circumstances, Balram's father realizes the value of education. He is a rickshaw puller but a "man with a plan" (Adiga 27). He wants his son to read and write. Yet due to the heavy debts, Munna or Balram is enforced to quit school and work at a tea stall. That is why he remarks ironically that his story narrates how "the half-backed" (Adiga 207) are shaped in India. His labour in the tea shop signifies the continuation of slavery in India. His father was a slave and his elder brother Kishan and he are also slaves. He says, 'Why did I feel that I had to go close to his feet, touch them and press them and make them feel good-Why? Because the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: Hammered into my skull, nail and poured into my blood, the way sewage and industrial poisons are poured into Mother Ganga` (Adiga 193). As Balram grows up, he becomes aware of class relations, authority, the feudal system and the power equation rampant in the society. Being poor, unemployed and discriminated against leads to his exclusion from economic, social and political life. The varied experiences in his personal and social life of domination, segregation, vulnerability and discrimination resulted in the feeling of marginalization. Kagan describes marginalization as the core of keeping out from satisfying and recognizing full social lives at the personal, interpersonal and public levels. The marginalized groups have quite control over their lives and the

wealth offered to them; they may turn into disgraced and are frequently at the getting last of pessimistic public approaches. Their chances to contribute to social construction may be restricted and they may build up low self-confidence and self-admiration (Kagan). Marginalization leads to the feeling of alienation.

Alienation further constructs powerlessness which is at the heart of most of the current literature. It also directs to meaninglessness resulting in 'low confidence limits'. The alienated person is powerless to guess future outcomes of behaviour. Thus, the marginalized psyche is distinguished by distortion, marginalization, otherness and difference. This falls out in a dualism between the Oppressors and the Oppressed. Theories related to inequality are highly developed by almost all disciplines of the behavioural and social sciences. These clarifications of violence and aggression are correlated to the different ways in which hierarchies, privileges, inequalities, oppressions and discriminations, on the one side, outwardly stimulate several people to exploit, abuse, and in general take advantage of those labelled as socially substandard, and on the other side, internally stimulate those persons subject to the labels of the poor standard to oppose and fight aggressively against their positions. These clarifications of violent behaviour are stranded in the political economies of personal property and industrialist development.

In this novel, Balram's father is forced to spend his life in misery due to poverty. A farmer's life in the village is a prolongation of the same age-old misery and poverty. Farmer is cooped up because of his family. But Balram plans to come out from the coop. His first move is to go away from his family. In the city, he spends all his time in the company of other drivers. He becomes conscious of the differences that exist between the haves and the have not's in India. He understands that the poor in the city take on and carry out several ways and means to bamboozle and cheat their employers. They lie, cheat and steal to be like their masters. Balram too does the same in the company and becomes "from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and

wickedness" (Adiga 197). He starts drinking in the same style as his master and dressed up like him, visits the city mall and longs for a prostitute with golden hair. Balram's behaviour is in harmony with the Reference Group Theory. He believes that the behaviour of Mr Ashok is the ideal behaviour and mimics it. He compares himself with his employer. He wishes to get luxury life in the societal status but is also keenly aware of his weaknesses. Strain theory stresses that, while facing the virtual achievement or success of others around them, ineffective or poor persons get dissatisfied with their condition. The higher the strain, the greater the inequality; the greater is the stimulus of the poor individuals to do a misdeed or a crime. In this aspect, inequality is allied with misdeed or crime for the reason that it is associated with poverty. Places with high inequality tend to have high poverty rates. Facts also validate that as the poverty gap widens in India, caste-based violence is also flashing throughout the country. This nasty circle needs to be broken. Strategies of freedom from marginalization have to be worked out. As Balram turned Ashok commented, "I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Ashok who, for all his numerous virtues, was not much of a master-to-be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace him" (Adiga 320).

Yet despite having made it and having broken out of the coop, he is not able to forget his real self—that of being Balram. He delightedly declares, "I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not be a servant" (Adiga 321).

In the novel, Balram Halwai faces various kinds of mental stress because of the class discrimination that he faced during his childhood. He belongs to a poor class family, so from his childhood, he faced so many problems. The novel is based on the disparities of two worlds: darkness, inhabited by the poor and underprivileged who cannot even meet their bare minimums; and the lighted world, inhabited by zamindaris, politicians, businessmen etc. who shamelessly exploit the ones from darkness, making them even poorer and grows their grandeur.

Balam refers to it as the "Darkness". When Balam was asked which caste he was from, he knew that it could ultimately cause a biased stance in his employer and determine the future of his employment. There is a big difference seen in Balam's lower caste from back home and his current higher caste in their lifestyles, habits, and standards of living. This shows how our economic system today creates socioeconomic discrimination that creates a big division in society. It limits opportunity, social mobility, health, and other rights and pleasures that should be given to all. There is a big disparity in the amount of money circulated in society today and this book is alluding to that fact.

The struggle for survival makes the poor people forget even their family and everyday life. For example, the protagonist in *The White Tiger* is not given a name till he goes to school. When he is asked about the name by the schoolmaster the innocent boy replies, that they have "...got no time to name me" (130). This shows the plight of the poor in India. But, the aspiration of the poor is very evident when Balam's father once tells his son "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" (30). Here, this father understands his social position and his inability to fight the existing social structures. So, he wants his son to break this chain of slavery. It is at this point that the seed of emancipation was sown in the mind of the protagonist.

The author also exposes the role of religion in constructing the walls of class division. The idea of slavery, in the name of religion, is propagated systematically by the upper class. Adiga quotes the belief in God Hanuman. "Hanuman, everyone's favourite God in darkness... He was the faithful servant of the god Rama, and we worship him in our temples because he is a shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love and devotion" (19). This is a serious criticism of the existing religious sentiments.

At last, Balam kills his boss. He is by that time a self-reliant, intrepid, who can visualize lettering to a Chinese Premier in that kind of voice. The brutality he has done has strengthened him.

According to Franz Fanon, at the personal stage, aggression or violent behaviour is a cleaning force. It clears the colonized of their poor standard, of their submissive and depressed mood. It strengthens them and restores their confidence level (Fanon 51). Balam has to take this tremendously extreme step for the reason that an animal turns into a human being; a human being from a donkey into a human being who deconstructs himself. By doing this act, he is going to attain what all his generations were devoid of: that is Sovereignty; Sovereignty from the iron handcuffs in which he is locked up. Murdering is essential in the first stage of upheaval says Sartre, eradicating in one go the tormenter and the subjugated: a man killed and the others set free (Sartre IV). In addition, by doing so he is rinsed out at the cost of his family in the dusk, is rinsed out of his inferior self of being a subaltern, and rinsed out of the disgrace of being called a family when he is nothing more than a maidservant. Thus, the application of Strain Theory is evident here to the readers of Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

Arvind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* is a Marxist critique of the caste, institutional, and religious systems that are present in modern industrializing India. Balam Halwai, the unreliable yet genuine protagonist, insists on the right to basic human dignity for all Indians. Through his attempts to escape the "rooster coop," he becomes the example that all Indians should strive to emulate. The novel is an effective attack on the dominant ruling classes of India who currently keep the poor as their servants. In line with Marxism's main goal of spurring a communistic revolution that favours the working class, Balam demonstrates the complacency of the rich and the pauperized state of the Indian poor and urges the proletariat to rise against their oppressors. Through the poignant use of juxtaposition, the author frames the rich as morally corrupt, religion as a tool of subjugation, traditional familial ties as costly, and Indian institutions as dysfunctional.

The debate on the stand of Balam's way to emancipation is never-ending. Adiga uses 'the roosters in the coop' image to explain the practicality of the situation as follows: "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" (173).

Balram has two options in front of him; either to surrender or to rise above. Adiga explains, "...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" (64).

Balram is conscious of the consequences of killing his master, but he ignores them. Still, the hunger for establishing himself in life amidst chaos and oppression forces him to take illegal and unethical means. In the end, he registers, "it is true: a few hundred thousand rupees of someone else's money, and a lot of hard work, can make magic happen in this country" (301). The stand of Balram is a shocking revelation about the changing ideals in our country. But such incidents have become an everyday affair. "... everyone who counts in this world, anyone who has killed someone or other on their way to the top? Kill enough people and they will put up bronze statues to you near Parliament House in Delhi – but that is glory, and not what I am after. All I wanted was the chance to be a man – and for that, one murder was enough" (318). Balram's claim showcases a drastic degradation in the attitude of modern youngsters which is a threat to the integrity of the country. The political and judiciary systems are also responsible for the change of ideals in India. Because the youth witness every day that affordable criminals and politicians walk on the tight rope of trials with money in hand. Hence, the youth also try this adventure of becoming rich by any means and come up on the social ladder.

Adiga raises a serious question about a possible change in the prevailing social setup. As an observer of society, he seems to be pessimistic about a possible turnaround. He strongly says, "An Indian revolution?... It won't happen. People in this country are still waiting for the war for their freedom to come from somewhere else... That will never happen. Every man must make his own Benaras. The book of your revolution sits in the pit of your belly... Crap it out, and read" (304). Thus, Adiga points out

the different oppressing agencies which further divide the people in the name of caste, religion and economy. Also, the author warns that the prevailing class division, economic inequality, political oppression and the failure of the judiciary may lead to social unrest if immediate attention is not paid.

Strain theory stresses that, while facing the virtual achievement or success of others around them, ineffective or poor people get dissatisfied with their condition. The higher the strain, the greater is the inequality, and the bigger the stimulus for the economically poor individuals to do a misdeed or a crime. In this aspect, inequality is allied with misdeed or crime for the reason that it is associated with poverty. Places with high inequality tend to have high poverty rates. Facts also validate that as the poverty space widens in India, caste-based violence also goes up throughout the country. This nasty circle needs to be broken. Strategies of freedom from marginalization have to be worked out. As Balram turned Ashok commented, "I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. It needs masters like Mr Ashok -who, for all his numerous virtues, was not much of a master-to-be weeded out, and exceptional servants like me to replace him" (Adiga 320). Yet despite having made it and having broken out of the coop, he is not able to forget his real self—that of being Balram. He delightedly declares. "I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not be a servant" (Adiga 321).

Being born and brought up in extreme poverty, Balram struggled a lot to achieve economic success through legitimate means. But when he realized that it was impossible, he adopted illegitimate means to achieve success. He has used crime as a vehicle for his vertical mobility and to push him to the peak of success, along the journey from chauffeur to an entrepreneur. In the novel, we can see the protagonist's urge to attain a higher standard of living. He was forced to commit a crime to change his social status. According to strain theory, individuals commit crimes for the societal pressure on them to achieve higher standards of living. If we analyse the book from the Marxist point of view we can understand that in society lower-

class individuals face many kinds of social discrimination from the society.

Social discrimination creates a kind of pressure in the mind of an individual which leads them to attain higher standards of living. And the extreme urge for upper-class life leads the working class to commit crimes in their life. In the Marxist ideology, we study class discrimination and the struggle faced by the so-called have-nots. In strain theory also the same reasons forced people to commit crimes. So in the novel, we can understand that Balram's situations are also equally responsible for his crimes. He had faced that much social discrimination and pressure all around him. So therefore Marxism and strain theory are inter-related in this novel

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