

FASHIONING OF BALRAM HALWAI IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

Priya

Assistant Professor, Department of Verbal Ability 1(B)
Lovely Professional University
Phagwara, India

Abstract: Main character Balram Halwai from the novel *The White Tiger* written by a renowned Indian writer Aravind Adiga commits a severe crime. He murders his own master. This becomes a turning point in his life from being a chauffeur to being a business entrepreneur and tycoon. The way his identity is fashioned as result of his own wishes and expectations and the surrounding controlling mechanisms and forces that manipulate and alter his thought and perception is brimful of convoluted incidents that take place before the murder. The concept of Self-fashioning as speculated and described by Stephen Greenblatt deals with fashioning by an individual and the surrounding factors. The cultural and social forces act upon the mentality of an individual and thus bring about a mutual understanding between the old-self and new-self, and old-authority and new-authority. The process of self-fashioning goes through a tremendous procedure in Balram's life.

Keywords: Self-fashioning, the Self, the Other, authority, new-Self, new-authority, transformation, Mirror Stage, cultural artifacts, identity, power-struggle, class conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* circumvents the dichotomies between Light and Darkness, rich and poor, and landlords and servants. Adiga explores the psychological upbringing of the protagonist Balram Halwai in an explicit manner by writing in first person narrative. The novel flashes the spot light on Balram who is the White Tiger of the novel, a rare species in the jungle and is determined to jump out of the cage of Rooster Coop. Adiga brings forth the repressed intensions of the poor to be like the rich and he goes to an extreme extent by making his protagonist murder his own master. A play of realizing selfhood different from the other comes into role as the protagonist keeps on comparing and contrasting himself with his master. The objective of this paper is to investigate the novel for evidences that answer the question of how the process of fashioning of Balram's character takes place in the novel that further leads to a construction of his identity.

2. FASHIONING OF BALRAM HALWAI IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

Identity has been one of the major concerns in historicism, psychoanalysis, psycholinguistics, sociology, feminism, postmodernism, cultural studies, and other theories. With the emerging trends and concepts, identity is looked upon from different angles and is defined from different perspectives. One of the concepts is the Self and the Other. Comparison and contrast have been made between the Self and the Other in most of the literary theories. Jacques Lacan has very well defined the Mirror Stage in which an infant looks at its own image in a mirror and is able to demarcate between the Self and the Other. Lacan has proposed this concept in language acquisition when he posits that the Mirror Stage is a transitional phase from the Imaginary Stage to the Linguistic Stage. It also has applicability in the field of identity construction. This happens in the very beginning of the process of understanding selfhood. Thereafter, an individual is exposed to different aspects of life. S/he leads a path where external forces are perpetually influencing the path. So, identity of an individual is constructed by social, economic, political, philosophical, and ideological forces. Culture of a society in which that individual lives cultivates his/her thought and perception, fancies and imagination, and manner and

attitude. It is perceived that one's identity is created and manipulated by the environment in which one lives. This perspective contradicts the autonomy, the subjectivity of an individual. It is opined that individual has the authority to self-fashion his/her identity free from the controlling forces of the world.

Self-fashioning is a process of attaining selfhood. Stephen Greenblatt describes "self-fashioning as the Renaissance version of what (Clifford) Geertz had called the control mechanisms that constitute a culture" (Johnson 335). This means that fashioning of a character takes place in some controlled landscape. In his *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, Greenblatt has set some "governing conditions" (8-9) for self-fashioning of characters in a literary text. He posits that the process of self-fashioning involves "submission to an absolute power or authority" (Greenblatt 9) which is external to the Self. In addition to this, even if one is hostile towards an authority, it suggests one's submission to it. He has further explained about the "alien" who is a "threatening Other," "unformed or chaotic," "demonic," or "distorted image of the authority." (Greenblatt 9) This alien needs to be "discovered or invented" by the Self "in order to be attacked and destroyed." (Greenblatt 9) This means that the Self has to subjugate the Other for gaining authority. S/he needs to destroy varied alternatives for maintaining his/her autonomy. The authority and the alien are the "inward necessities" (Greenblatt 9) for the Self in order to fashion its own identity. This is because if there is no competition, one would not feel any need to change. This is like a survival instinct. Self-fashioning also involves certain 'loss of self' or 'its own subversion'. And, in some cases, there is a radical transformation of the Self. Greenblatt cites Clifford Geertz description of ideas and emotions of a man as "cultural artifacts" (Geertz 81). He posits that even a free choice made by an individual is not at all free but from a delimited array of possibilities. Thus, it is a mirage that someone who thinks s/he is choosing something or making some decision himself/herself is an illusion. After critically analyzing the six writers in his work *Renaissance Self-fashioning*, in the conclusion, Greenblatt contemplates about the "unfettered subjectivity" (Greenblatt 256) of the Self. He opines that the Self is autonomous and is not contained in any box or chained with some shackles. At the same time, he also favours the role of cultural institutions that foster one's identity. This suggests that the process of self-fashioning involves both fashioning by oneself and fashioning by cultural institutions.

Indian society prevailing in the times of young Balam Halwai was infected with class-distinction and caste system. Culture of the society in the rural areas was divided between the zamindars and the workers. Certain hierarchies were framed or constructed on the basis of caste and then class. There were four landlords in Laxmangarh who formed the upper stratum of the society and thus called the authority. The Stork owned the river flowing near the village. The Wild Boar owned the agricultural land around the village. The Raven owned the rocky hillside. The Buffalo owned the roads and the rickshaws. He was the greediest of all. The villagers have submitted themselves before these four lords who owned almost all the resources used by the villagers. There was a huge bridge gap between the rich and the poor. For a poor person, money and wealth act as the authority. But even if that poor has earned much money, still s/he is subjugated on the basis of his/her birth and family status. If father serves a particular family, his son too is going to serve it no matter how much he earns. Balam Halwai also feels the same way that he is subjugated under the same authority. Like his family, he has too submitted himself to these landlords and their autonomy. This is why, at the end of the story to maintain his powerful position in the society, Balam takes up the name - "Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur, settled in Bangalore" (Adiga 302). He knows that a Halwai (sweet-maker) cannot rule as per the societal norms.

In the process of self-fashioning, Balam Halwai needs to discover the Other. For him, this Other is Mr. Ashok. The character of Mr. Ashok in the novel evolves with every other incident. According to Greenblatt, the Other is someone who threatens the identity of the Self. However, Mr. Ashok does not reflect these attributes in the very beginning of the novel. As the novel commences, he is shown as a kind man and unlike his family members, he understands and respects Balam Halwai and his faith in religion. He is not represented as a threatening man. After Pinky Madam left, some sort of understanding was built between Balam and Mr. Ashok. But with the arrival of the Mongoose, "(this) intimacy was over between me (Balam) and Mr. Ashok." (Adiga 187). Mr. Ashok goes on to an extent of drawing a concrete visible line between him and Balam when he says, "But without family, a man is nothing. Absolutely nothing. I had nothing but this driver in front of me for five days. Now at last I have someone real by my side: you (the Mongoose)." (Adiga 188-189). He challenges Balam's real being. For him, he does not exist in his real world. This is how Mr. Ashok threatens the Self – the protagonist of the novel. But, at the same time, because Mr. Ashok is his master, he becomes the authority for Balam who surrenders before him. In this way, he is not 'the distorted image of the authority,' but the authority itself. Mr. Ashok is seen both as the authority and the Other by Balam.

The process of discovering the Other does not go smooth in Adiga's novel. The authority turning into the Other for Balram encounters a number of sub-processes. First, Balram considers Mr. Ashok to be the authority as he is his master. Second, he perceives the world from his master's perspective. This becomes clear when Balram says, "I saw the room with *his* (Mr. Ashok's) eyes; smelled it with *his* nose; poked it with *his* fingers – I had already begun to digest my master!" (Adiga 78-79). He challenges the authority by using his own senses the way his master uses his. Third, he becomes aware of the Other. With every thread the novel proceeds and Mr. Ashok's character evolves, Balram starts considering Mr. Ashok as the Other who threatens his identity. This goes on to an extreme with the mentioning of 'replacement driver' (Adiga 268). Balram is unable to digest this fact of getting replaced by some local driver.

As the protagonist of the novel discovers the Other, his next attempt in the process of self-fashioning is attacking the Other. Balram has submitted himself before his master Mr. Ashok. But as soon as he realizes that his identity is being threatened by his master's identity, he fears that he would remain a driver, a servant to his master for whole life. He has to bear and take all the ill-words and rebukes because he is born to serve the landlords owing to his and his family's so called 'eternal' serfdom. Balram's father once mentioned, "My whole life, I have been treated like a donkey," and wanted that one of his sons "should live like a man." (Adiga 30). And, Balram, being the White Tiger, wants to get out of this vicious circle, and thus challenges the authority and the Other. He starts anticipating about "What would be *my* destination, if I were to come here with a red bag in my hand?" (Adiga 247). This 'red bag' becomes a symbol of his new-authority which is wealth and status of being rich and a businessman. For him, "My seven hundred thousand rupees" "...was enough for a house. A motorbike. And a small shop. A new life." (Adiga 280). In the process of self-fashioning, it is seen that the Self changes the authority as well before which he wants to submit himself. The Self bows before a new-authority.

The shift from old-authority to new-authority is a result of all the forces that are acting upon the mentality of the Self. In Balram's case, the social, economic, political, psychological, and cultural forces have acted in terms of class-conflict, rich-poor gap, power-struggle, mental upheavals, and cultural favouritism. Old lover of Mr. Ashok objectifies Balram by calling him of 'village kind.' Even other characters belonging to higher strata, particularly Mr. Ashok, persistently consider that Balram is illiterate and has no privacy. However, in the present time, having demolished the social differences, Balram admits in his letter to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao that he belongs to a community of great men who are at a higher stratum by saying, "I consider myself one of your kind." (Adiga 3). Religion and caste play a crucial role in determining the kind of work one is able to do. When Kishan went to an old taxi driver for asking him to give Balram driving classes, the taxi driver said, "Muslims, Rajputs, Sikh – they're fighters, they can become drivers. You think sweet-makers (Halwai) can last long in fourth gear?" (Adiga 56) Balram overcomes this difference as well. He further says, "a billion servants are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses..." (Adiga 125). *Murder Weekly* magazine is quite common among the servants of the city. It creates a particular perception and hatred among the poor towards their masters. This tendency often leads to crimes in reality as well. Society aide in the construction of its people's conscious, subconscious and even unconscious. The stature of Mr. Ashok falls even further in the eyes of Balram when he is with another woman in his car because Balram has "never approved of debauchery inside cars..." (Adiga 203). Economy also plays a substantial part in changing one's perception, one's identity. In the beginning of his job as a chauffeur under Mr. Ashok, Balram seems to be satisfied with minuscule salary he is given. But later, when he starts cheating his master through a number of ways, every time he looks at the money made by cheating, he feels enraged. "The more I (steal) from him, the more I (realize) how much he (has stolen) from me" (Adiga 231). Certain fear from culture and incidents happened with others has also mushroomed in Balram's psyche. This becomes substantial when he speaks to himself, "Think, Balram. Think of what the Buffalo did to his servant's family" (Adiga 249). A poor becomes an expected target to be victimized. All these mentioned factors engulf the Self to pounce on the Other with full spirit so as to demolish it completely and change his/her own plight.

Greenblatt opines that the Self attacks or devastates the Other for attaining self-fashioned identity. In common parlance, this process tends to take up some ideological, psychological, social, economic, or political path to bring about change. However, Balram treads on a criminal alley to subvert the old-authority, to dismantle the Other completely, to vocalize his own superiority, and thus, to attain his selfhood. He is already aware that "...a total of ninety-three criminal cases – for murder, rape, grand larceny, gun-smuggling, pimping, and many other such minor offences – are pending against the Great Socialist and his ministers at the present moment" (Adiga 97). He knows that jurisdiction is not functioning properly and thus it strengthens crime. Even before murdering Mr. Ashok, while driving, Balram thinks of "*smash(ing)*

(his) skull open” (Adiga 257). He considers Mr. Ashok to be a father-like figure. But still he murders him. He even makes fun of Mr. Ashok’s ‘kind’ that they are ‘blind’ “To have a madman with thoughts of blood and theft in his head, sitting just ten inches in front of (them)” (Adiga 257). Balram takes pride in saying, “...I am not just any murderer, but one who killed his own employer (who is a kind of second father), and also contributed to the probable death of all his family members. A virtual mass murderer.” (Adiga 45) The extent to which an individual is forced by the environmental forces and the desire to gain autonomy over his/her individuality has gone to greater heights, leading him/her to transform the identity radically.

It is the law of nature, according to Balram, that the power keeps on hopping from one authority to the other. But in this process, the fashioned identity of Balram is not the same as it was earlier. “The story of (his) upbringing is the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced.” (Adiga 11). However, contemplating upon his transformation at the end of this ‘story’, he has “changed from a hunted criminal into a social pillar of Bangalorean society.” (Adiga 292). Later, he turned into a ‘business entrepreneur’. He has lost a major part of his Self and has now evolved into a new-Self that is more confident, powerful, and rich – the way Balram wanted and wished. Now, he has attained a position in the higher stratum and protects himself from being cheated by his employees in the same manner as he did to his master. He confirms this by saying, “I don’t like showing weakness in front of my employees. I know what that leads to.” (Adiga 313). All this communicates the impact of self-motivation that has led to such transformation. But, the role of external forces can never be overlooked. As it was the impact of these forces that crawled into Balram’s mind, and thus changed or modified his ‘way of thinking and perceiving’.

3. CONCLUSION

An individual is not an isolated being. S/he is considered to be an individual only by comparing and contrasting him/her with the society. When a person is determined to bring about change in him/her, s/he is liable to function in accordance with or against the prevailing norms, customs, and traditions. Cultural milieu of the society wherein a wide range of ideologies, perceptions, and differences based on varied factors like caste, class, economy, etc. function together to administer or inflict substantial impact on the people of the society and their further culture. Adiga’s character Balram Halwai is no exception. Balram says, “I’m a man of action and change.” (Adiga 5) However, his actions and change are brought about by a number of external factors. Not only are his actions fashioned in this process, but also his thoughts. Once he thought, “I like eating your (Mr. Ashok’s) kind of food too.” (Adiga 239) Thus, Greenblatt argues that self-fashioning is not just a fashioning of one by oneself but a collaborative fashioning of one’s actions and thoughts by external factors. In this process of transformation, new-authority and new-Self come into existence and are the replacements for the authority and the Self. In addition to this, in some cases, the authority is the one who is the Other as well. Such cases become quite convoluted. Adiga has interwoven this complexity in a subtle and effortless way.

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