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MULTIDIMENSIONAL BORDERS IN ARVIND ADIGA'S THE WHITE TIGER

Michael Arockiam

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph University, Virgin Town, Ikishe Model Village, Dimapur, Nagaland, India – 797 115

ABSTRACT

More than ever, borders of migration, caste, class, economy, gender, and language, among others, are polarizing humanity. Arvind Adiga's Man Booker Prize-2008winning novel, The White Tiger, abundantly explores these border themes. Using the literary device 'epistolary,' the protagonist of the novel, Balram Halwai, writes a series of letters to the visiting Chinese premier, highlighting the adverse effects of these borders, which are interwoven with 'dark humour'. The protagonist aspires to surpass the barriers of hegemony established by these multifaceted borders, albeit through corrupt and unethical methods. Education and economic independence should enlighten everyone's mind, enabling them to envision a new mind-set that appreciates differences and views 'others' not as 'adversaries' but as 'cocatalysts' in the creation of a borderless frontier where peace, equality, progress, and universal humanhood are the goals of all good-willed individuals.

KEYWORDS: *Fence, border, caste, class, mindset, transcend*

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INTRODUCTION

The immortal words of Heraclitus of Ephesus, "Life is a flux," have become a reality now more than ever before. Mobility is the new mantra of anyone who aspires to scale the zenith of success in life. People worldwide continue to migrate from villages to towns and cities and from one country to another, seeking opportunities for business, pleasure, relocation, and resettlement. Though these journeys have often been memorable and rewarding, at times they do result in cultural conflicts that lead to insecurity, threats, violence, and loss of life. Thus, transcending borders does not create an encouraging environment to help us live "in peace" as friendly neighbours but "in pieces"—intruders, strangers, and adversaries. The on-going conflicts between Russia and Ukraine and in other parts of the world, are a glaring example of this kind. Other subtle disputes in many countries, stemming from regional, religious, caste, class, and racial boundaries, are everyday concerns. Arvind Adiga's The Man Booker Prize 2008-winning novel, *The White Tiger*, is a blazing and brilliant portrayal of such perspectives interwoven with multidimensional borders. The protagonist, Balram Halwai, embarks on an odyssey to transcend the darkness of castes and poverty to the light of status and opulence, entwined with debauchery, depravity, and wickedness. Even though he transcends these boundaries, he continues to engage in corrupt and immoral behaviour as a mental slave. Thus, he contributes to a world of egoism, indifference, hatred, and division. Hence it becomes the responsibility of people of goodwill to create a borderless world where solidarity and progress and equality reign supreme for all.

Adiga enhances his debut novel by utilizing the literary device 'epistolary,' wherein an exchange of letters conveys the narrative entirely. The genre of an epistolary novel is that it conveys the intimate view of the protagonist's thoughts and feelings without any visible interference of the author and presents the shape of events to come with dramatic proximity (Wiehardt). The letters convey a transnational border concept for the main character, who composes a minimum of seven letters to the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao after hearing an announcement about his upcoming visit to Bangalore (Adiga 3). The letters are evidence of the darker areas of bondage, financial thriving, murder, and entrepreneurship.

BORDERS OF CASTES

According to Biswas it is fascinating to note that there is no reference to any kind of caste system in the most ancient Sangam literature of India. Some of the Vedic hymns also assert that there is no evidence of caste division in society. Caste is not an eternal system. It is neither scientific nor natural. It is an artificially devised method to inflict exploitative measures on the subjugated native people of the eternal colony called India (29).

Newfield opines that the origin of caste structure in India can be attributed solely to function and function. Functional differentiation led to occupational differentiation and the emergence of numerous sub-castes, including Lohar (blacksmiths), Chamar (tanners), and Teli (oil-pressers). Thus, the hierarchy of castes was based on occupation, with those in higher and more respectable professions considered superior to those in lower professions. Louis Dumont states that castes teach us a fundamental social principle of hierarchy: The brahmin caste is at the top of this hierarchy, and at the bottom is the untouchable caste. The intermediate castes, whose relative positions are not always clear, sit in between(Rehna).

In his CNN interview, Rishabh Pratap expressed his opinion that, despite the long-standing outlawing of the caste system in India, the traditional social hierarchy still elevates Hindu Brahmins above other castes, particularly Muslims ("Caste"). *The White Tiger* highlights Indian society's pessimistic outlook towards the people of lower social caste. The protagonist of the novel, Balram Halwai, refers to it as "Darkness" and contrasts it with the people of high castes, who he perceives as "Light." The protagonist, in humility, acknowledges his upbringing in Laxmangard village in the vicinity of Ganges in the Darkness. He belongs to the Halwai caste—a caste that makes sweets and tea because it is in their blood (63).

In this village, a street is split in two by a busy sewage strip. Rice, cooking oil, kerosene, and other commodities are all identically tainted and degraded by the merchants. The god they worship is Hanuman, a half-monkey, half-man who served Rama faithfully.He inspires the low-caste people to worship him as a shining example of serving their masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion (19). Balram's childhood idol, Vijay's family, belonged to the lowest caste—pig herders. He first became a bus conductor, then a political party worker, and finally a prominent person in the political party of the Great Socialist (31).

When asked about his caste, Balram replied that he was from the bottom caste since he was aware that answering the question about his caste could hurt his future, cause his employer to have a biassed attitude, and affect his career prospects.The landlord, Stork, asserted that all his employees were from the top castes. It would not hurt to hire a few bottom castes. Therefore, Balram was hired (64). Balram's employer, Ashok Sharma, while living in America, felt that religions and castes did not matter, but he, after his separation from his wife Pinky, feels that castes and religions do matter in India. His father asked him not to marry her because she was of another caste and religion (185). Mukesh, Ashok's

brother, also asserts that Ashok made a mistake by marrying a girl from outside their caste and religion. Once again, society's disapproval of a divorced man forces Ashok to remarry, with his family choosing a girl from their caste and religion (239).

Life for individuals from lower social classes never appears normal, and their struggles never cease. Hence, they continue to live under mental slavery—once subaltern, they always remain subaltern in mind. India is a land of castes; however, nobody spearheads the creation of a casteless society. Thus, the Indian nation has transformed into a conglomeration of small-caste-nations, states Biswas (4). The protagonist articulates this concept poignantly as he meticulously cleans his master's feet. He questions himself, "Why should I be cheered up and made to feel good?" The concept of serving others had been ingrained in himto serve others. It was permeated in his blood. He affirms saying, "Once a servant, always a servant: the instinct is always there, inside you, somewhere near the base of your being" (193).

Both in the village and the towns, Balram was appalled by the way people lived.Even as a boy, he hoped for an improved future because he wanted to remove the restrictions imposed by the inflexible border.Vijay becomes a man of prominence by associating with the greedy landlords and corrupt politicians. Balram transforms into a successful entrepreneur and a key contributor to Bangalore's economy, assuming the identity of Ashok Sharma, his former high-caste employer whom he had assassinated. He makes a big difference in lifestyle, habit, and standard of living. Thus, the protagonist tries to transcend the borders of caste. However, the ill treatment, abuse, and even ostracization of low castes in India are far from over.

BORDERS OF MAN - WOMAN

The sexual division of labour between women's and men's work, along with their subtle behavioural and attitudinal expectations, is a complex issue. Women employers face significant obstacles; one of them is their failure to claim fair economic value for their productive work. United Nations Development Programmes (UNDP) report that women globally put in more hours than men and contribute more than half of all economic activities in societies, despite the division of their work. In contrast to men's three-fourths of work, only about one-third of women's work is on a paid labour market. Women spend their substantial time in housework and childcare. In developing countries, women engage in hard work such as collecting water and firewood, as well as planting and harvesting. Although unpaid work is inevitable to the running of families, it is the labour market work that is valued as "productive work" and rewards monetary benefits of which men receive more benefits than women (Rothman 22).

Balram presents a picture of the border between men's and women's internal and external disposition towards life and work. His aunts, cousins, and Granny Kusum work in the courtyard of their house. One of them feeds their buffalo, and another winnows rice. They fight by throwing metal vessels at each other or pulling each other's hair, but they reconcile by kissing their palms and pressing them against each other's cheeks. They all cuddle together at night—women in one room and men in another room (Adiga 21). At dawn, Balram, along with his father, takes the buffalo for her morning bath. Many men in the village work as rickshaw pullers. Marriage is a big affair in the villages, and brides' families give dowry and gifts to the grooms' families. Balram explains that they were in a dire situation because they were the girl's family. In contrast, grooms' families receive dowry. Balram again says that since they had the boy, they got a huge sum of dowry from the girls' family.

The emotional perspective portrays women as loving and caring. The protagonist's granny, Kusum, comes across as an able woman capable of running her large family. She cooks a special chicken curry for him and asks him to provide for the family by regularly sending his salary. She also coaxes the protagonist to get married. But he delays and discards her suggestion by projecting himself as a stubborn man determined to become a great, successful entrepreneur.The novel also portrays some city women as highly sought-after objects of attraction and sexual pleasure, drawing the attention of working-class men, entrepreneurs, businessmen, and politicians.

Pinky, Balram's mistress, presents herself as an honest and homely woman, insisting on helping the victim after the hit-and-run incident. However, Ashok, her husband, prevents her from doing so with his cunning and insincere ways.Rothman says, "Social scientists originally reserved the word "sex" for the physiological and biological differences that distinguish males and females and "gender" for socially defined and acquired behaviours and expectations of males and females in a particular culture at a historical point in time" (22). Males respect women in theory, but in practice, they subject them to cruelty, ill-treatment, and various forms of misbehaviour. Regardless of their economic background, women have fallen victim to these abuses (Chawla 1). Thus, the border between men and women never seems to merge.

BORDERS OF RICH AND POOR

Differences in wealth and material possessions are one of the most visible forms of borders. These variances cause inequality in society. Millions of people struggle to make ends meet; leaving thousands homeless and forcing their children to roam the streets and seek shelter in major cities. On the other hand, a privileged minority enjoys the benefits of significant wealth. Landlords, business moguls, and entrepreneurs earn disproportionate wealth in their business. They never have to worry about the source of their next meal or how they would afford their other needs. Some of them live an ostentatious and extravagant lifestyle (Rothman 2).

The genre of 'dark humour' highlights the border between the 'haves' and the 'have nots in *The White Tiger*. Dark and morbid content characterizes this genre of humour, yet it maintains its amusing nature. One may interpret it as severe, given that it encompasses a broad spectrum of jokes, such as those addressing death, violence, and suffering (Upadhye). The novelist employs this genre to gently draw readers' attention to the indescribable desolation of the poor and unfortunate. While describing the disparity between the rich and the poor in the country, the protagonist compares a rich man's body to a premium cotton pillow, which is white, soft, and blank, while a typical poor man's spine resembles a knotted rope, like the kind used by women in villages to draw water from wells. He presents his father as a perfect example of a poor man (26).

Further, one of the causes of the disparity between the rich and the poor is the age-old feudal system in India. The word 'feudalism' comes from the old French word 'fief,' which means 'fee.' Consequently, an area of land, particularly a leased one, receives payment in the form of labour rather than cash (Cartwright). Through his childhood experiences in the village, the protagonist illustrates how this system has systematically impacted the poor in rural villages, resulting in their lives being made miserable. He gives a glimpse of his abject upbringing in an obscure remote village in India, which he refers to as Laxmangarh in the vicinity of Ganga. The village was engulfed in the darkness of poverty, sewage, and filth, and the "children are too lean and short for their age, with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine…," (20).And as the houses in this village are too small, the legs of the six individuals sleeping together fall one over the other, like the legs of a single millipede.

When waiting for the bus to drop off passengers, this village's poor rickshaw-pullers had to crouch instead of sitting on the plastic chairs. Most of them were shirtless—a visible sign of extreme poverty. Pigs and stray dogs near the tea shop would scatter mud and filth. The protagonist asserts that his village, despite having everything, was devoid of anything valuable due to the lack of knowledge of time, technology, politics, or anything related to modernity among the residents (64).

In contrast, this village was under the control of four landlords: the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar, and the Raven. Each landlord derived their names from the unique characteristics of their appetites (24-26). They owned the road, the river, the agricultural land, and the wasteland, respectively. They forcefully collected a commission from all those who worked in their respective area of land or river and sexually abused those who failed to pay the cut. They lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh, basking in the comfort of everything inside, and had no need to go out into the village except to feed the members of their household.

Again, tens of thousands of poor young men from the villages sit in teashops, reading newspapers, or lie on the charpoyand chat with a picture of a movie star, or chirp a tune for they have no job to do for that day. They understand that they are unlikely to secure employment. They have surrendered to their circumstances (54). The protagonist also says that thousands of poor people live on the sides of the road in cities like Dhanbad, Delhi, and Bangalore. Their slender physique and soiled faces, together with their animalistic way of life beneath big bridges and overpasses where they burn fires and wash and comb their hair of lice, all demonstrate their poor origins. On the other hand, the cities are teeming with riches. These cities' glass skyscrapers provide witness to the affluence of the wealthy.They live in big housing colonies. However, they undertake no consistent and permanent efforts to bridge the boundaries between the poor and the rich.

ETHICAL AND UNETHICAL BORDERS

The Oxford English Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines 'ethical' as associated with beliefs and principles about right and wrong, addressing issues that are morally correct or acceptable (Hornby et al. 523). In contrast, 'unethical' refers to something that is not morally acceptable (1705). The readers confront many ethical and unethical border themes in *The White Tiger*.

The protagonist presents a contrast between his village school teacher and the visiting school inspector. The village school teacher acted unethically by stealing groceries intended for the children's free food scheme and taking away their free uniforms. No one held him accountable for his actions, as he had not received his salary for six months. On the other hand, a school inspector stood out for his sincerity and ethical nature. He questions the insincerity of the schoolteacher and reprimands him for not performing his duties in utmost sincerity. Moreover, the schoolteacher had a habit of sleeping in the classroom, allowing the students to waste their valuable learning time, while the inspector was deeply concerned about the students' future. He teaches them to thank God for being born in a glorious land like India, where Lord Buddha received enlightenment. The Ganga River is a source of life for plants, animals, and people. He eulogizes Gandhiji and the Great Socialist Politician, saying that anyone in any village can grow up to become prime minister of India. Finally presenting a book to Balram, he names him as a white tiger (36).

Balram's father, Vikram Halwai, was an honest and hard-working man. Despite experiencing immense misery and suffering, he chose to perform the backbreaking task of rickshaw pulling. His village was plagued by poverty, sewage, and filth due to the landlords' control over it. Working as an indentured worker under these village landlords would have

been much better and easier for him. But he deliberately chose not to be an accomplice in their illegal and corrupt business (22-23).

Balram also presents Kishan, his brother, as a man of morality. He obeys his father and Granny Kusum, follows the family's marriage arrangements, works diligently, and genuinely cares for his family. He arranges money for Balram to learn driving. In sharp contrast, Balram is ambitious. Balram declines his grandmother's request to marry and doesn't send his promised salary home. In his pursuit of realizing his dreams, he begins to deceive his masters by syphoning fuel, falsifying bills, and squandering his money on alcohol and women. Ultimately, he murders his employer and flees with a sum of seven lakh rupees. However, he neither repents nor shows any interest in leading a life of morality. He continues to act unethically by bribing the law enforcement department in Bangalore.

Balram's employer Ashok's wife Pinky comes across as a sincere woman. In an inebriated state, she ran over a boy in the wee hours of her birthday bash on her way back home in Gurgaon. However, upon realizing her mistake, she desired to exit the car, transport the victim to the hospital, and make amends for the damage she had caused. But Ashok prevents her from doing this. Finally, Ashok, his family, and a lawyer persuaded Balram to take responsibility for Pinky's damage (162-163).

BORDERS OF SIN AND GUILT; AND ATONEMENT

The word 'sin' has been in use for well over a few thousand years. Our current form of the word comes from the Middle English 'sinne,' which is itself from the Old English 'syn.' The original meanings of sin were largely concerned with religious matters—"an"offence against religious or moral law"; "a transgression of the law of God"; "a vitiated state of human nature in which the self is estranged from God," as they still are today.

Guilt is defined as "a feeling of worry or unhappiness that you have because you have done something wrong, such as causing harm to another person" (Guilt). Thus, sin refers to an action whereas guilt pertains to memory. One cannot separate feelings of guilt and sin. One must transcend the borders of these areas to a realm of atonement with oneself and others to live in harmony and progress. According to Hornby et al. (82), 'atone' signifies the act of expressing regret for past wrongdoings, while 'atonement' refers to the act of redeeming oneself (Atonement). Intentional or unintentional, sin can be an act like murder or a failure to testify. Where sin is the cause, guilt is the effect—the logical consequence of having committed a sin (Hundley).

The White Tiger presents Balram, the village school teacher, the landlords, politicians, and the entrepreneurs as unscrupulous offenders who do not reflect upon their actions and their consequences; rather, they become self-reflexive to indulge in more crimes and seed an environment for greed and indifference. The village school teacher was guilty of stealing what was meant for the poor children from the Darkness, and he never felt the need for atonement. A government program provided each boy with three rotis, yellow daal, and pickles for lunch, according to the main character. But at noon, they never saw any lunch and they all knew why: the teacher had misappropriated their lunch money. He took the school uniform as well.

Balram's employer, Ashok, was guilty of not providing him and his co-worker Ram Persad a decent accommodation. This indifference to the servants made him guilty albeit he pretended to be normal. He promised to give both Balram and his co-worker Ram Persad a better room to sleep in, with separate beds and some privacy. But he never fulfilled his promise. He was also guilty of the coal mining business his family engaged in, as they were forced to bribe

politicians and ministers to evade taxes and maintain the business. Having come home after bribing a minister, Ashok Sharma expresses his regret for doing so and cries out of his guilt. Balram further says that he opened the refrigerator door and cast a quick glance back and saw that Ashok was on the verge of tears. Ashok detested working in his family's industry for he had to appease cabinet ministersand bride many others to keep the family business going. Hence, he would do something better, something clean. Disgusted and disappointed at what he was doing, Ashok affirms, "Sometimes I wonder, Balram, I wonder what is the point of living. I really wonder"(186). Nevertheless, as an America-educated gentleman, he never made any serious effort to atone for his mistake or redeem his family from the mess.

While working as a helper in a teashop in Dhanbad, Balram learned how to cheat. He says, "I did my job with near-total dishonesty, a lack of dedication, and insincerity—and so the teashop was a profoundly enriching experience" (51). Again, as he was looking for a driver's job, he lied about his experience and skills in driving, saying, "Any need for a driver, sir?" I have got four years' experience. 'My master recently died, so I—' (59). Looking at the cash Balram made by cheating his master, he felt rage and not guilt. (231). Even the prostitute Balram meets at the hotel feels guilty and unhappy about the profession she does (235). Balram does not regret murdering his ex-employer, Ashok. He affirms, "Now, even though I killed him, you will not find me saying one bad thing about him. I safeguarded his reputation during my tenure as his servant. I owe him so much." (47). He did not want to do what he did—murdering his master (282). Despite feeling guilty about his actions, he never felt the need to repent. Instead, he rationalized his actions, saying, "I accept the label of a murderer." It is a fact: I am a sinner, a fallen human." (102). The guilt of murder darkened his soul. He acknowledges that no amount of skin whitening creams will be able to cleanse his hands (318).

However, he does not use the numerous sleepless nights for self-reflection and self-reconciliation. Nevertheless, he cultivates a self-reflexive approach, using it to spearhead his personal growth by planning of a series of crimes. The term 'reflexivity' is applied here because it takes a person deeper into anything once he becomes more aware of it, for that awareness will reflect itself back into new ideas and new ways of doing things (Torres; web). Therefore, what aids the protagonist is not self-reflection, but rather self-reflexivity in engaging in corrupt and immoral actions. There are several instances of atoning for sins in the literary world. David in the Jewish tradition and Paul and Augustine in the Christian tradition are the classical examples of people who admitted their sins and yet, as sinners, recognised their own worth in God's forgiveness and redemption (Curran). The characters of *The White Tiger* never wish to transcend the borders of sin and guilt to a realm of atonement and amendment that would create persons of integrity and reliability.

CONCLUSION

'Mobility is growth,' goes the dictum. Without movement, one cannot achieve anything worthwhile. Like a sunflower that moves towards sunlight for growth, human beings keep moving from place to place for survival and growth. However, just as thorns and thistles obstruct and impede the growth of plants, borders of divisive and destructive forces pose a significant obstacle to freedom, growth, and development of humanity. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* is bursting with borders of dualities: rich–poor, man–woman, ethical–unethical, sin–atonement, and pollution-purity. Balram Halwai, the protagonist, tries to transcend these borders through corrupt and immoral means. Although he has crossed these borders, he remains a slave to the mental borders of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness. Thus, the researcher has argued that borders have created 'beneficial fences' but 'not beneficial neighbours.' There is a need to 'leap over the bounds' of limitation, block, and danger because no peace-loving person wishes to remain confined to these borders. When we begin to love and respect others as ourselves (Matthew 22:39), we will transcend the myopic realm of borders and constraints that leads to division

and hatred to a borderless domain of freedom, amicability, solidarity, and progress. Thus, 'the other' will no longer be a stranger, intruder, or adversary but a 'friendly neighbour,' and acceptance and appreciation of differences will become essential more than ever before.

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