



The Nation and its Underbelly in *The White Tiger* and *Slumdog Millionaire*: An “Unvarnished Portrait” or A Replication of Orientalist Stereotypes?

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Novels and films have the ability to reach out to a large audience and drive a particular idea home better than any other medium. Hence the image of the nation they try to create is more easily accepted and forms the basis for the general understanding of the country and its people. It was in the post World War period that the subject nations under colonial regime realised the importance of asserting their cultural roots and creating a concrete national identity. In fact, it is especially in Third World fiction after the Second World War that the fictional uses of 'nation' and 'nationalism' are most pronounced (Brennan 46).

Postcolonial writings arose as a reaction to the loss of identity incurred as a result of the colonialist regime. The colonial writings had created tropes and stereotypes to cope with the erotica and mysticism that the Europeans confronted in their new formed colonies. During the post-colonial era, especially in the immediate post independence era, in an attempt to counter and break free of the shackles of Oriental tropes and stereotypes imposed upon them, the contemporary writers created obverse tropes and typecasts. Thus postcolonial writings could not actually prevent their self being objectified, they could only reverse the existing situation. Recently there is a tendency to sell these colonial stereotypes in the world market for consumption. Those aspects of India which the Westerners can easily associate with, from their past experiences, travel documents and other fictional as well as non fictional reading materials are included in their rendering of a 'national story'. A close perusal of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* demonstrate similar trends. The problem with national representations in these films and fiction is that they are sometimes exaggerated or otherwise projected to the forefront to cover up for their lack of aesthetic appeal. Film and fiction use numerous methods to superimpose a miserable picture of the nation above the plot. Stereotyping is a main representational practice by which the westerners had been defining the colonized. Said in his magnum opus 'Orientalism' talks about how the natives of the colonial countries are stereotyped by the Westerners in an inferior position.

Said says: Oriental is a myth or a stereotype. But over a period of time, this myth came to be perceived as a systematic knowledge of the East. Westerners had many preconceptions about the colonized...The colonizer also reserved feelings against the Muslims. They were believed to be aggressive and virulent. Especially after the 9/11 attack, this conception got strengthened and Muslims started being identified with excesses.

In case of Salim, he is religious and takes his namaz before going about on hideous tasks for his master. Hence this can also be viewed as an attempt to relate violence with the Muslim community or more specifically terrorism with Islam. The West has always looked at the East with wonder and disbelief mixed with a feeling of condescension. This is transferred to the Oriental stereotypes used in fiction and film in the contemporary postcolonial era. Khan quotes B. Jayamohan's words about the film *Slumdog Millionaire* thus: "It's always a safe theme because for more than 300 years the West has been trained to believe this one kind of 'reality' about India" (94).

India of Darkness mentioned in *The White Tiger* is in agreement with the features of the primitive India that the Europeans have set up. The people are drawn as primitive, savage and ignorant in both. The main protagonists of the two Balram Halwai and Jamal are self taught seekers of the world, directing an overt criticism on the elementary education system of India.

The classroom scenes of *Slumdog Millionaire* resemble the classrooms of "half baked" Indians of *The White Tiger*. Children are all huddled together, the four walls blaring with the monotonous humdrum and the teacher is more or less stereotyped. He chews pan and is short tempered. He is interested only in stealing money from the government funds than in enlightening students. "There was supposed to be free food at my school – a government programme gave every boy three *rotis*, yellow *daal* and pickles at lunchtime. But we never ever saw *rotis*, yellow *daal*, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money" (Adiga 32). The author here is bent upon not representing the reality of an impoverished India but rehashing related stereotypes. Finally in the movie, Jamal is unable to answer the last question in the quiz show because of the unscientific and incompetent methods of the teacher and education he received.

There are also instances of conspicuous and forceful attempt at degrading the status of the country and relegating it to a subservient position as compared to the English speaking nations. In one of the scenes, Jamal is stamped and hit by the native driver mercilessly. Jamal shouts to his clients thus:

"You wanted to see a bit of real India? Here it is."

However, the American foreign visitors take pity on the young boy in spite of being deceived and robbed of their car! The English woman prevents the driver from further attacking the boy and gifts him some money with the words, "Well! Here is a bit of real America son." (Patel, Pinto and Kapoor)

Again, the honesty of Indians is further put under question in the novel when Adiga describes the rooster coop. Indians are forced to be honest because they are caught in a bureaucratic system like in a rooster coop. It means that they require someone to monitor their lives at all times, someone like a European master.

Indians are the world's most honest people, like the prime minister's booklet will inform you? No. It's because 99.9 per cent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market (Adiga 175).

Hence sincerity becomes attributed to Indians not as an inherent virtue but practised because of absence of choice.

Characterization of domestic servant folk in the novel conforms to the image drawn by memsahibs in their accounts about India (memsahib accounts recorded in *Memsahibs Abroad* by Indira Ghose). The chauffeurs in *The White Tiger* are portrayed as simple men without any thought or manners, spending money lavishly for marriages and indulging in bawdy jokes. They are obsequious to their masters, chew pan and clean their teeth with a twig. Their fake servant's grin and manners is often mocked at in the novel "In the evening, the Nepali came to me with a grin on his face - the same fake servant's grin he showed to the Stork all day long (Adiga 110). They are thought to be compliant and brainless. They are considered filthy and unhygienic owing to their belonging to the lower class. Servants abuse other servants and are in a constant effort to assert their superiority among the working class They have a liking for bizarre coloured objects especially clothes. "Getting out was as tricky as getting in, but again the guards didn't say a word to me, and I walked back to the parking lot, got into the car, and changed back into my usual, richly coloured shirt, and left the rich man's plain T-shirt in a bundle near my feet

(Adiga 152)“.

Throughout the novel, the author is in a continued process of identifying and generalizing aspects about Indian life. He picks out certain traits in the life of Balram, describes it as the general characteristic of the servant class in India and thus presents it as the outcome of living conditions and general ambience of the country. Use of generic terms like ‘servants’, ‘people’, ‘men’, ‘women’ etc makes it further complex. In most cases he attributes the characteristics of the people to the nation as a whole – “my country” (Adiga 6).

The plot of *The White Tiger* is not a complex one; neither does Adiga’s writing style help it to lure the readers. The narration which in the beginning started off in an epistolary method later reels off to a rambling mode. However, the novel brought him the prestigious Man Booker Prize of 2008, which is given to the best literary piece in English from among the Commonwealth nations. Similarly the SDM which was adapted from an Indian English novel *Q&A* (2005) by Vikas Swarup is more of an English film than Indian. Above the fact that the entire cast was English, which of course is the language of the director Danny Boyle, the crew of the film was mostly Englishmen. The script itself was rewritten by another Englishman Simon Beaufoy. However, the setting or the characters were not deliberately altered. The contents of the novel, the incidents and even the theme of the novel were changed. The film won eight academy awards subsequently. It won’t be unfair to claim that the shots taken in the slums of India along with the dialogues and living conditions portrayed help the film make its way through to the Oscars. It had more than 4 lakh viewers in Europe.

Again, Rubina Ali, Ashtarudin Ismail Sheik and other slum children cast in the film were taken to Los Angeles for the Academy award distribution ceremony by Danny Boyle and other film crew. In a way it was an attempt at emphasizing the genuineness of scenes and conditions shown in the movie. The fact that the children actually belonged

to slums in India increases their authenticity. The name of the filmic version – ‘Slumdog’ Millionaire thus achieves new dimensions. The casting now appears more natural than rehearsed. In his essay “Encoding/Decoding” Stuart Hall proposes that in a televisual communication process, the more natural a sign looks, the better disguised it will be.

The main inspiration behind this form of picturisation is readership/viewership and international recognition. Again, most of the established writers these days have their publishing houses outside India, mainly in Britain or America. *The White Tiger* was published by Free Press, America; *Q&A* by Doubleday, Great Britain; *Midnight’s Children* by Jonathan Cape, Britain; *Narcopolis* by Penguin Group, America. The film *Slumdog Millionaire* is also a Hollywood production, released by Twentieth Century Fox distributed by Paramount productions in USA. Sir Simon Jenkins former chairman of the Booker prize jury comments thus: “Indian writers in English face a peculiar problem – they write about India but their readership is mostly in other countries. Because of this paradox they create an image of India that is exotic and doesn’t show the real India. I worry about this” (Sunday Times of India, Oct19, 2008).

Throughout the narration, Adiga jostles between an insider and an outsider position. Even when he uses first person narrative ‘we’, the attacks directed upon Indians as a whole arise out of a Western point of view. Similarly, in the film too, Danny Boyle had taken every effort to make it seem like an American movie in spite of claiming it to be Indian with an aim to please his western audience primarily. Hence a distorted image is presented to the English speaking world as the true image of their once colonial subjects. Such stereotype descriptions of the country can only be seen as exaggerations to gratify popularity and readership in the world market.

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