

THE WHITE TIGER: A SAGACIOUS QUEST IN EPISTOLARY TRADITION

DEBALINA SENGUPTA

Research Scholar, Department of English & Culture Studies, The University of Burdwan,
Burdwan, West Bengal, India

ABSTRACT

Epistolary novel is a fictional genre written in the form of letters or documents, integrating higher realism to create absolute absorption of the audience. The term is derived from the Greek word “*epistolē*” (a letter) and under its veil it often impersonates the society to create a larger-life effect among the audience. Our present text of discussion, the Booker winning debut novel of Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, surprisingly has been written in this practice, incorporates letters from Balam Halwai to Wen Jiabao, describing his journey from a rooster-coop to a successful entrepreneur. This fiction unfolds slowly how a Halwai resists the oppression of the master class people and ultimately is able to create a distinct identity irrespective of class, caste, creed and societal taboos after committing a violent murder of his employer. Murder is always an act of violence, we are never granted to take the life of others, however criminal he may be. But in the case of Balam, this violent act of execution produces a cathartic effect. He wins over all the societal obstruction as well as family ties through this purgatorial crime.

KEYWORDS: Catharsis, Epistolary, Journey, Murder, Oppression, Quest Etc

INTRODUCTION

The White Tiger, a realistic masterpiece in epistolary genre by Aravind Adiga, won the coveted 40th Man- Booker Prize in 2008. It is a narrative about the mundane, compelling journey of a sweet maker, Balam Halwai, from adversity to prosperity, from a bare living to a thriving entrepreneurship. As the title suggests, the white tiger is an exceptional species, comes out only once in a year from his forest abode. Likewise, Balam was distinctly marked among his community. First, he surpassed all through his intelligence, loyalty, presence of mind and devotion in work, and finally he dared to commit the murder of his employer to fortify himself from the societal manacles. Scripted in seven inter-connected parts, the novel raises a protest from a social underdog, revolting from his marginal sphere and as a Bildungsroman, sketches the journey of a modern anti-hero, too. Oscillating between Laxmangarh and Gurgaon, the novel is a dazzling portrayal of the relation between masters and their servants, highlighting the struggle for emancipation of the weaker class in a Neo-Marxist perspective. Marginalized people are often neglected on the basis of race, gender, culture, economy and ethnical discriminations by the mainstream. *The White Tiger* is all about Marxist resistance in which Balam, the protagonist, narrates his life story to Mr. Wen Jiabao, Premier of China, in seven nights from his desk, which is a revolt of a deprived against the mainstream of society and social values, made by the power centre. Through this novel, Adiga has magnificently annulled Spivak’s view, and established here effectively that a ‘subaltern’, too, is competent enough to speak.

Epistolary Novel: an Introduction

Epistolary novels are those varieties of fiction generally written in form of letters. The characters, for producing higher realistic effects among the readers use this prop. This type of novels find their first existence in Spanish "Prison of Love" (*Cárcel de amor*) (c.1485) by Diego de San Pedro, which belonged to a tradition of novels in which a large number of inserted letters dominated the narrative. After that, there are many more novels written in this tradition, like Edmé Boursault's *Letters of Respect, Gratitude and Love* (*Lettres de respect, d'obligation et d'amour*) (1669), the immensely famous *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (*Lettres Portugaises*) (1669) by Gabriel-Joseph de La Vergne, comte de Guilleragues and so on. The first employment of this technique in English fiction can be traced back to James Howell's *Familiar Letters* (1645–50), which describes the life in prison, foreign adventure, and about the love of women. After HOWELL, another essential experiment in the genre to be mentioned is Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*, which appeared in three volumes in 1684, 1685, and 1687. The novel shows the genre's results of changing perspectives: a realm of intrigue with letters that fall into the wrong hands, faked letters, letters withheld by protagonists, and more complex interactions. The epistolary novel as a genre became popular in the 18th century in the works of such authors as Samuel Richardson, with his immensely successful novels *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749). In France, there was *Lettres persanes* (1721) by Montesquieu, followed by *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), which used the epistolary form to great dramatic effect, because the sequence of events was not always related directly or explicitly. In Germany, there was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774) (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) and Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion*. The first North American novel, *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) by Frances Brooke was written in epistolary form.

Unlike the 17th century, the advent of 18th century witnessed a different type of epistolary fiction, which resulted in a number of savage burlesques. The most notable example of these was Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), written as a parody of *Pamela*. In it, the female narrator can be found wielding a pen and scribbling her diary entries under the most dramatic and unlikely of circumstances. Oliver Goldsmith used the form to satirical effect in *The Citizen of the World*, subtitled "Letters from a Chinese Philosopher Residing in London to his Friends in the East" (1760–61). So did the diarist Fanny Burney in a successful comic first novel, *Evelina* (1788). The epistolary novel slowly fell out of use in the late 18th century. Although Jane Austen tried her hand at the epistolary in juvenile writings and her novella *Lady Susan* (1794), she abandoned this structure for her later work. It is thought that her lost novel *First Impressions*, which was redrafted to become *Pride and Prejudice*, may have been epistolary: *Pride and Prejudice* contains an unusual number of letters quoted in full and some play a critical role in the plot. Even in 19th century this type was employed in some novels. Mary Shelley used the epistolary form in her novel *Frankenstein* (1818). Published in 1848, Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is framed as a retrospective letter from one of the main heroes to his friend and brother-in-law with the diary of the eponymous tenant inside it. In the late 19th century, Bram Stoker released one of the most widely recognized and successful novels in the epistolary form to date, *Dracula*. Printed in 1897, the novel is compiled entirely of letters, diary entries, newspaper clippings, telegrams, doctor's notes, ship's logs, and the like, which Stoker dexterously utilized to balance probability and theatrical strain.

ADIGA and Epistolary Tradition

As I have mentioned, epistolary genre is not a new trial in fictional genre. But Adiga, in the advent of 21st century employed this form to generate initially an epigrammatic aftershock among the readers. Written in monologic form, the novel describes how the protagonist Balaram unfolds his heaviness to Mr. Jiabao, describing his poverty, class struggle and cold blooded murder as an act of manumission and emancipation. Balaram, the son of a rickshaw puller in a small village Laxmangarh, scripted his autobiography in the form of a long letter, written through seven long nights and portrayed all the ups and downs in the metamorphosis from Balaram Halwai to Ashok Sharma, a successful entrepreneur.

Balaram's Life as a Struggler and his Pursuit of Freedom

Balaram Halwai, a representative of darker India, was the son of a rickshaw puller. He was the keenest achiever among his fellows, that's why he was this name 'the white tiger' as one of the rarest species comes once in whole generation. But his education and boyhood dreams all go in vein as he was forced to leave his school and work in a tea shop as a boy servant, wasting his childhood breaking coals and wiping tables. Practically his dreams was marred by the Zamindari capitalism, where, his family failed to return the loan taken from the Zaminder and Balaram's life doomed to a perpetual slavery for generations. His meagre income and dissatisfactory life led him quit his studies and like some other illiterate people he offered himself as a driver to rich Indian colonials. In this way, his life got a break from Laxmangarh to Delhi. Bewildered first, he gradually adapted himself in the robe of a faithful servant of Ashok and Pinky madam. At the same time he was jealous of the treasure of his employers. They have abundant property to waste, and he has meagre to save. Even, his own family was a demanding one. His brother Kishan and his grandmother claimed his salary to keep on their own household. Even, in his professional area too, he experienced hatred, jealousy and despise from other servants. Only Mr. Ashok was gentle enough to his sufferings. Unlike his brother Mukesh, he always tried to understand the situation of Balaram, and often helped him with extra tips. Ashok's unhappy marriage with Pinky madam and his vulnerability affected Balaram heavily. Crisis occurred when in a fit of quarrel Pinky madam demanded for driving the car and redundantly knocks down a poor boy, sleeping at the footpath. To safe corner themselves, they persuaded Balaram to accept the charge by influencing his fine sensibility that he too, was the part of his employers family. So he should be offered as a scapegoat to repay their kindness bestowed on him. Though later, no complaint was lodged from the dead's relations, because they were too poor to launch protest against the wealthy master class. Balaram was saved, but bitterness crammed his mind. He started seeking opportunities for liberation. He visualizes the rooster coop as:

Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other, shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench – The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their

Brothers lying around them. (167)

However the chickens don't even think of trying to break out of the poorly constructed coop because they are so busy trying to find a breathing space in order to keep alive. In Balram's opinion "99.9 percent of us are caught in the rooster coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market" (168). It is not that these men are not as capable as the rich but they are taught to be slaves so well that they make no effort to break out of the coop. But Balram does not want to be a 'rooster' in a 'coop', he doesn't want to wait to be 'eaten' rather is desperate to be the member of the 'eaters'. He noticed

that prospect was scattered for the wealthy master class people, but the servant class was treated as the distinct 'other', doubly colonised first by their masters, and secondly by the societal grasps. Slowly, Balaram began to envy Ashok, he duped him and tolled money for recreation in liquors and prostitutes. But ultimately was disgusted by the realization that the people of his standards are only allotted cheap things- sluts, slums and diseases; they are not blessed to have blonde American fair girls for sexual recreations, but only cheap Indian girls with dyed hair. Abomination and detestation repulsed his psyche. He finally got the chance of liberation, as Mr. Ashok was going to pay a corrupted bellied member of the ruling party an amount of Rs. 7,00,000 in cash, he cold bloodedly murdered his master with a liquor container. Ashok died immediately, and with this money Balaram went to Bangalore, created a group of drivers' company, named 'The White Tiger' and adopted a new name, Ashok Sharma. He does not repent for a second, nor pays any second thought to this venial crime, because it was necessary for his liberation. He does not even look back to his family, because he knew, his family did have to pay the retribution of his crime. One day, in the newspaper he read the death of all seventeenth members in a family in Laxmangarh and stoically accepted it to be his own. Thus, finally deserting everything and all he satisfied the continuum struggle and justly fortified his function as a 'white tiger.'

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, Balaram is the central pivotal, around whom the centrality of action revolves round. The text is a fervent cry of a deprived character as well as his radical resistance against the oppressed class populace. He left no means untried but the society never valued his potentiality. So, his committing the murder was a sort of voicing against the societal norms. So, it can be supposed as a total contradiction with the outlook of Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, who in her 1988 essay, "The Subaltern Cannot Speak" has described how the suffrage voices are benumbed deliberately; but in this novel, the portrayal of the Bildunsroman journey from a halwai to the boss of white tigers, shows that subalterns can also speak, if they are given choice to. Thus, in this way, I have tried to graph the episodes of Balaram's life beginning from a tea boy to a successful entrepreneur; I know that murder can never be the excuse of anything- good or bad, but still Balaram is not a die hearted criminal and his character well deserves the sympathy and applause from the readers in his triumphant discard of situational manacles. Written in epistolary form, the novel is, therefore, a balanced carve of a genius artisan none other than Aravind Adiga. I conclude with the words of famous Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz:

If these poor beasts ever lift up their heads,

Mankind would, then, forget all deeds of rebellion.

If they decide, they can own the universe,

Even chew down the bones of their cruel masters. (The Dogs: Sain Sucha)

REFERENCES

1. Adiga, Aravind. 2008. *The White Tiger*. Harper Collins: New Delhi.
2. Ashcroft, Bill. Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffen. 1989. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature*. London: Routledge.
3. http://www.faizcentenary.org/poems_in_english.html (*The Dogs* by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Translated by Sain Sucha)

4. Joseph, Molly M. 2009. "The Great Indian Rooster Coop- A Postcolonial Entry into Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*". *Littcrit* 35.1:76-79.
5. Loomba, Ania. 1998. *Colonialism/ Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
6. Sebastian, J A. 2009. "Poor-Rich Divide in Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*". *Journal of Alternate Perspectives in Social Sciences*.1.II: 229-245.

