

Narrating Resistance: Postcolonial Power, Discourse, and Subaltern Agency in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine how Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) and Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) deal with power, oppression, and resistance in postcolonial India by way of using some of the insights of Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault. By integrating certain conceptualisations, viz., Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Althusser's theory of ideology and ideological state apparatuses, and Foucault's discourse theory, the analysis reveals that the chosen novels present a society where the ruling elite maintains dominance by way of a combination of coercive force and subtle ideological conditioning. In context, Mistry's depiction of India's 1975–77 Emergency signifies the state's repressive apparatus. On the contrary, Adiga's critique of twenty-first-century India is a powerful narrative, and it foregrounds how entrenched caste and class ideologies keep the underclass subservient. This is how both of these novels serve as counter-discourses that give voice to subaltern characters and challenge official narratives of democracy and progress. Accordingly, this paper argues that these novels may be interpreted as emancipatory postcolonial texts to unveil the workings of hegemonic power and also gesture toward the possibility of subaltern resistance and social change.

Keywords: Hegemony; Ideology; Discourse; Subaltern; Democracy; Social Change.

Introduction: Fiction as Counter-Discourse in Postcolonial India

In postcolonial literary studies, questions of power, oppression, and resistance are of paramount importance. The selected texts, i.e., *A Fine Balance* and *The White Tiger*, explore the grim realities of inequality and subjugation in post-independence India and also peel off the veneer of the nation's progress. On a critical note, these novels have sometimes been labelled as presenting anti-nationalist narratives that portray India in a harsh light; however, such critiques

miss the deeper purpose of Mistry and Adiga's works. Far from indulging in pessimism for its own sake, the novels serve to speak for others in the manner that Foucault envisioned for the intellectual. In context, they function as what Foucault called "bombs for others to throw" (qtd. in Lewis 129). In other words, Mistry and Adiga use fiction as a means to expose and undermine the hegemonic discourses that legitimize oppression in India.

For the purpose of analysing how these novels unveil relations of power, this paper adopts a theoretical framework that is grounded in three influential thinkers: Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault. Gramsci's understanding of cultural hegemony explains how a ruling class secures the consent of the governed. It disseminates an ideology that people somehow internalise as 'common sense'. Althusser foregrounds that ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) enforce the dominant order through the dynamics of coercion and consent. Foucault holds that power/knowledge and discourse provide a complementary lens by way of highlighting that power is diffuse. Thus, it operates through discourse and actively shapes what is accepted as truth and normality. Notably, this integrated framework converges on a key idea, i.e., enduring oppression depends on the complicity of those oppressed and on deterring dissent through strategic displays of force.

It is in this larger context that the following sections will examine the chosen novels to foreground the way(s) each narrative emerges as a counter-discourse of resistance. *A Fine Balance*, set during the tumultuous mid-1970s Emergency, portrays an autocratic state's deployment of both brutal coercion and "pathetic phraseology" (Gramsci 345) to justify its rule. *The White Tiger*, a post-millennial narrative, satirically exposes the rhetoric of a new democratic and economically liberalized India to reveal an underclass that is still entrapped by what Balram Halwai (the novel's protagonist) calls the "Rooster Coop" (Adiga 173) of servitude and self-policing subjection.

Theorizing Power: Gramsci, Althusser, and Foucault in Postcolonial Context

Before taking up the textual analysis, it is apt to delve into the concepts of hegemony, ideology, and discourse with a view to contextualise our understanding of postcolonial power relations. Gramsci conceived of hegemony as the means by which a ruling class leads society through intellectual and moral leadership, and makes sure that there exists a consensus that its values are the norm. For this purpose, hegemony is achieved by creating a balance of consent and coercion. While the state's repressive institutions (police, military, laws) are its fist, a more insidious power lies in civil society's institutions and cultural narratives that manufacture the consent of the dominated classes. In context, Gramsci's concept of consent is crucial to interpreting phenomena like *The White Tiger's* "Rooster Coop" (Adiga 173), wherein individuals have "internalize[d] their subjugation, perceiving it as their natural fate" (Adiga 173-74). It also foregrounds that hegemony works by way of inserting the ruling class's perspective into the common sense of society so that the status quo is accepted perpetually. Accordingly, both novels exhibit how certain ideologies are internalized by characters as "just the way things are" (Gramsci 244), signifying Gramscian hegemony at work.

Althusser delineated the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), which include institutions such as schools, churches, family, media, and even culture and literature, to interpellate individuals. Such institutions shape them into subjects who unconsciously adhere to the dominant ideology (in contrast to the Repressive State Apparatus of government, police, courts, etc., which enforces rules directly). Under Althusser's context, ideology is not just a set of ideas but a material force, permeating rituals and practices to the point that people enact their own subordination, believing they do so by choice. People "live or perform their ideologies by treating them the same as their world-in-itself. In this sense, ideology shapes our experience materially and thus inscribes our social practices" (Sharma and Niharika 13). So,

the state's power endures because people "live under the illusion that [they are] behaving, acting, and thinking freely" (Althusser 76). Contextualising *A Fine Balance* and *The White Tiger*, this conceptualisation helps us to explain why the oppressed characters often participate in/accept systems that oppress them. For instance, Balram in *The White Tiger* observes that "the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy" (Adiga 175). It signifies the layered nature of the servant-master ideology, and therefore, from childhood, Balram's education (or lack thereof) and family upbringing prepare him to be an obedient servant. Likewise, in *A Fine Balance*, decades of caste-based conditioning lead the chamaar (leatherworker) community to accept their lot quietly until extraordinary circumstances provoke resistance. Althusser's insight that ideology hails individuals as subjects is visibly realized in these stories: individuals like Ishvar, Om, or Balram are "hailed" (Althusser 174) (i.e., socially identified) as inferiors—as low-caste, as servants, as "half-baked" (Adiga 10) men—and many come to perform that role, at least for a time, as if it were naturally theirs.

Notably, Foucault is the one who shifts the emphasis from ideology to discourse and from the state to the capillaries of power in society. For him, power is not centralized in a ruler or ruling class but is diffused throughout social relations. It is exercised through the production of truth and knowledge and through the micro-practices of surveillance and discipline in everyday life. In context, Mistry's narrative "is a realistic novel, one that makes us believe in the joys and aspirations and ultimate tragedy of its characters; yet at the same time it is an intensely political novel, detailed and ferocious in its critique of Indira Gandhi's dictatorship" (Goldblatt and Sorensen 181–82). Notably, the Foucauldian notion that power is potently illustrated in *A Fine Balance* by the Emergency's sterilization program, wherein the state literally seizes and modifies subaltern bodies in the name of a public good. Further, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power also signifies that where there is power, there is resistance, and, in this sense, power relations are dynamic and constantly provoke counter-actions. He

emphasises attending to the “non-dit” (unsaid) (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 12)—the gaps, silences, and counter-narratives that official discourse excludes. In our novels, the discourse of *India Shining* is systematically undercut by the grim counter-narratives presented through the lives of the poor. Balram Halwai’s subversive letters to the Chinese Premier (which structure *The White Tiger*) are a prime example of counter-discourse: he pointedly addresses “Beijing, Capital of the Freedom-loving Nation of China” (Adiga 3) to contrast China’s historical freedom from colonization with India’s continued entrapment by internal oppressors. The very act of narrating his story is, for Balram, a way to seize control of the discourse, to write himself into history rather than be written off by hegemonic narratives. Similarly, Mistry’s omniscient narration in *A Fine Balance* recuperates the silenced connotations of history by focalizing the experiences of untouchables, beggars, and other marginalized figures who are usually left out of official histories. In doing so, Mistry and Adiga fulfill what Lewis describes as the poststructuralist intellectual’s task: liberation is “conceivable only in terms of the unfixing of [dominant] assumptions and the release of the body from the historical inscriptions which construct identity in discourse” (129).

This is the overarching framework that informs the critique of this paper to analyse the intricate workings of power depicted in the selected novels. The next section examines how Mistry’s novel exposes the operations of hegemony during India’s Emergency of the mid-1970s to foreground the interplay between repressive force and ideological manipulation in an ostensibly democratic nation.

Emergency, Oppression, and Resistance in *A Fine Balance*

Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* provides a stark case study to comprehend the way(s) a modern state can deploy both coercion and ideology to maintain its rule. The Emergency was a 21-month suspension of democratic norms, a time often described as the darkest phase of Indian

democracy, during which civil liberties were curtailed, political opponents jailed, and draconian policies (including mass sterilizations and slum clearances) implemented in the name of national progress. Mistry's narrative has four protagonists from diverse backgrounds: Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohlah, and the tailors Ishvar and Om Darji. During turbulence, their lives intersect in an unnamed city, and it is through them that we witness how the state's hegemonic power taints the most intimate aspects of one's personal life. Notably, it somehow resonates with Foucault's insight about the pervasiveness of modern power.

Notably, this narrative also assesses the discourse of emergency that emanates from those in power. The government's rhetoric presented the suspension of democratic rights as a necessary sacrifice and labelled it as a "temporary but necessary measure" (Mistry 313). The narrative somehow deftly contradicts this official narrative vis-a-vis the lived reality of the poor. For wealthy characters like Nusswan, "the declaration of Emergency was the wisest decision" (Mistry 313). The slum clearance and sterilization drives were also perceived as a patriotic "service to the nation" (Mistry 313). This upbeat justification mirrors the Gramscian 'hegemonic narrative' because it frames a coercive policy as beneficial. The narrative, however, immediately juxtaposes this rosy picture with the brutal reality by stating that "so-called reformatory sterilization programmes messed up the lives of the slum dwellers" (Mistry 316). Mistry's "depiction of caste brutality and forced sterilization underscores how hegemonic violence operates not only through law but also through normalization" (Thieme 89). In this sense, Mistry's "narrative reminds us that caste violence operates not only through law and ritual but through the slow trauma of daily degradation" (Banerjee 92). Here, the Repressive State Apparatus is on full display in its most direct form.

The narrative also lays bare how hegemony is maintained by way of blurring the benevolent and the coercive. The same policy is sold as a welfare initiative to some and

enforced as a terrorizing imperative upon others. In a moving reflection, Ashraf, an elderly Muslim tailor who has seen his share of communal and state violence, laments the state of affairs as the “darkness of Kaliyug” (Mistry 80), [and] “Every day I pray that this evil cloud over our country will lift” (Mistry 521). His prayer acknowledges the ideological distortion at work. It signifies how deeply ideology and religion intertwine for the populace. Seen thus, Ashraf’s comment foregrounds the layered penetration of hegemonic ideology vis-a-vis the glimmers of nascent counter-consciousness among the subaltern.

To decode the nexus of state power and class/caste dominance in the narrative, it is important to refer to Thakur Dharamsi. In a flashback, Narayan (Ishvar and Om’s relative who defies caste boundaries) is brutally murdered by Dharamsi’s henchmen. This incident, which predates the Emergency, signifies the longstanding pattern of local hegemonic power. What the narrative foregrounds, however, is the way(s) the Emergency regime amplifies and legitimizes such repression. Later, when Ishvar and Om encounter Thakur Dharamsi (during the Emergency), they find that he has donned the garb of a politician. Ashraf warns Om not to seek revenge or even complain: “Nowadays, he [Dharamsi] wants to look respectable, avoids any *goonda-giri*. When he wants to threaten someone, he doesn’t send his own men; he just tells the police” (Mistry 520). In Gramscian terms, we see the fusion of civil society (landlord class influence) and state (police and political office) into a unified hegemonic bloc. The use of the police to do the landlord’s dirty work exemplifies how a combined repressive strategy operates.

Further, the narrative strategy also engages with subverting the hegemonic discourse of history. The novel’s omniscient narrator defamiliarizes the officially sanctioned version of events. Thus, the reader gets a multiplicity of perspectives, viz., the government’s proclamations, the rich man’s satisfaction, the poor man’s pain, and the outsider’s outrage. This plurality somehow gels with Foucault’s idea that suppressed truths and unsaid elements must

be excavated to understand the layered working of power. In the closing chapters (after the Emergency has been lifted), the surviving characters find their lives in a perilous balance. Om has been left crippled and castrated by forced sterilization, Ishvar is a beggar pushing Om in a wheelchair, and Dina has lost her business and independence. Concurrently, the narrative also strikes a note of hope by way of referencing the human kindness they showed one another.

Caste Ideology and Class Entrapment in *The White Tiger*

Adiga's *The White Tiger* deals with the contemporary India of outsourcing, malls, call centers, and globalized wealth and asks why the promises of democracy and development remain unfulfilled for the vast majority. The narrative is structured as a series of letters from Balram Halwai, a self-described entrepreneur and self-confessed murderer, to the visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. It is through Balram's witty and unapologetic voice that the narrative presents a searing critique of what he calls the "two Indias" (Adiga 14): an India of Light (signifying urban, affluent, upwardly mobile) and an India of Darkness (signifying rural, destitute, servile). In this way, the novel foregrounds how ideological control and systemic inequality go hand in hand in postcolonial India, perpetuating perpetual servitude. In a way, Adiga's novel "interrogates the logic of neoliberalism, showing how it repurposes caste and class hierarchies through the discourse of entrepreneurship" (Nandi 276).

The "Rooster Coop" (Adiga 173) is the central metaphor in the narrative. Balram introduces the Great Indian Rooster Coop as a way of explaining why India's underclass does not rebel en masse despite suffering egregious exploitation: "The roosters in the coop smell the blood... They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country" (Adiga 173–74). This metaphor

encapsulates Gramsci's notion of hegemony through consent and Althusser's interpellation in one visceral image. Adiga's "protagonist Balram is a classic case of interpellation—he not only recognizes the ideology but retools it to justify his rebellion" (Singh 204). The servants, drivers, cooks, and peons of India are the roosters, aware on some level of their fate; however, they are mentally conditioned to accept it. They police themselves, remaining in the coop of caste and class hierarchies even when the door is theoretically ajar. It is because the masters have managed to "hammer into [the servants'] heads" a servile ideology so effective that it outlives any individual master. "Imagine that one day, democratically, with ballots or without ballots, a billion servants announced to the rich, 'Enough,' Balram muses; the result would be revolution overnight. But this does not happen because of an elaborate ideological construction that he spends much of the novel delineating" (Adiga 175–76).

One key element of this construction is the notion of family loyalty, which Balram identifies as both sacred and brutally leveraged by the elite to maintain control. He recounts how any servant who considers betraying his master must reckon with the violent retribution that will be visited upon the servant's family. Balram himself experiences this bind: when Pinky Madam accidentally kills a child in a hit-and-run, Balram is forced to sign a confession taking the blame. He complies out of an inculcated fear for the safety of his distant family back in the village. As he later realizes, "only a man who is prepared to see his family destroyed—hunted, beaten, and burned alive by the masters—can break out of the coop. That would take no normal human being, but a freak, a pervert of nature" (Adiga 176). Balram thus becomes just such a "freak"—the White Tiger, a unique specimen who comes along only once in a generation—by steeling himself to sacrifice his family and murdering Mr. Ashok to steal his money and break free. His act of violence is both an escape from servitude and a mordant commentary on the system that made such an act the only escape. In Althusserian terms, Balram has managed to de-interpellate himself from the ideological role of the loyal servant, but doing so requires a

wholesale rejection of the values (family, duty, nonviolence) that society, via its ISAs, had instilled in him. It is a price so high that nearly all others choose not to pay it. Thus the Rooster Coop remains intact: it is, as Balram concludes, guarded from within by the very roosters.

The narrative also exhibits how ideology saturates daily life through language and labels. In context, Balram notes that although he and his fellow drivers are grown-up men, their masters call them “boys” (Adiga 64, 169), mirroring colonial terminologies to reproduce colonial attitudes. Religion also emerges as an ideological state apparatus. Balram observes, “There’s a rat living in our god’s corner, eating offerings... The gods are on the side of the roaches” (Adiga 6–7), implying that religion asks the poor to accept suffering and wait for metaphysical reward. Education, or its perversion, is another ISA depicted in the narrative. In Balram’s village school, most children remain illiterate or “half-baked” (Adiga 6). This is exactly how Althusser theorized the role of schools under capitalism.

Interestingly, Balram coins the term “Men with Big Bellies and Men with Small Bellies” (Adiga 64). This redefinition is significant on multiple levels. It shows Balram’s recognition that economic class has supplanted caste as the real determinant of one’s fate in the new India. It also indicates a conscious rejection of the intricate caste categories to foreground the physical facet of inequality, i.e., hunger vs. gluttony. This is a classic counter-hegemonic move and echoes Gramsci’s idea that common people can develop a “good sense” (Gramsci 333). Balram’s formulation is good sense. Gramsci “distinguishes between common sense (often a sedimentation of ideology) and good sense, which is the beginning of critical consciousness among the subaltern” (Crehan 148).

Throughout the novel, Adiga balances the narrative between acceptance and resistance, which maps onto the Foucauldian dynamic of power and resistance. In the first half of the novel, Balram is largely in acceptance mode: he plays the part of the loyal driver, internalizes

the humiliations (being ordered to massage his boss's feet, to clean up after a drunken incident, etc.), and even chastises himself for having moments of disloyal thoughts. We see the world of the servants through his eyes as one suffused with fear and "servant's etiquette" (Adiga 104). Yet even then, Balram's nascent critical consciousness breaks through in asides and observations. By the second half, after the hit-and-run incident and other moral shocks, Balram's tone shifts decisively towards resistance. Foucault's "work teaches us that power is productive, and it is through its microphysics that subjects are constituted and resist" (Mills 35). He deliberately begins to secretly defy his master (stealing small sums of money, going places on his own) as he plots his emancipation. Adiga builds tension around the question: will Balram actually go through with killing Ashok, signifying an act that is at once a horrifying crime and a liberating rebellion? When he finally does, slitting his employer's throat and absconding with a large bribe intended for a politician, Balram frames it not as purely personal revenge or greed, but as a parable of liberation. In this way, Adiga's novel "interrogates the logic of neoliberalism, showing how it repurposes caste and class hierarchies through the discourse of entrepreneurship" (Pordzik 12). He imagines great men of history—"Alexander the Great, Abraham Lincoln, Mao of China, and even Mahatma Gandhi"—watching over him, men who "led successful revolutions to free the slaves and kill their masters" (Adiga 304). The irony of including Gandhi (an apostle of nonviolence) in this list is deliberate in the sense that Balram sees himself as part of a lineage of revolutionaries. This is how/why he situates his individual act in a broader context of overturning the master-slave dynamic. What is notable is that this narrative foregrounds voices/truths that the dominant discourse of new India tries to suppress. Balram's perspective is that of the subaltern who can speak directly. In doing so, Balram exemplifies Foucault's point that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 95). In context, postcolonial narratives, "like *The White Tiger*, challenge

not only social hierarchies but epistemological ones—they recast who has the right to speak and be heard” (Brennan 112). Seen thus, *The White Tiger* is itself an act of discursive resistance.

Subaltern Voices and the Possibility of Resistance

Interestingly, the selected novels suggest that the subaltern can resist and even subvert the structures of power (though not without cost). Foucault contends that power relations inherently produce resistance, and people somehow end up finding ways to defy/evade control. In *A Fine Balance*, such resistance is often quiet and fragmentary. The narrative suggests that in a society determined to split people apart into hierarchies, the simple act of people from different backgrounds coming together as equals is radical. Seen thus, in *The White Tiger*, resistance takes a sharper and more confrontational form. By the novel’s end, Balram has fully embraced his new identity and declares, “I’ve made it! I’ve broken out of the coop!” (Adiga 320). The tone implies Balram’s hope to awaken consciousness in those still trapped. In a sense, the narrative projects Balram to interpellate the reader in a counter-ideological way. It is worth noting that neither of the chosen novels offers a simplistic revolutionary resolution. There is no mass uprising that topples the system in either story. This realism aligns with postcolonial scholars’ understanding that the legacy of colonialism, when mixed with indigenous hierarchies, produces tenacious problems that defy easy solutions. Instead of providing utopias, Mistry and Adiga’s works provoke readers to recognize the “historical inscriptions” (Gramsci 45) on our identities can be rewritten, but only if first brought to light.

Finally, these novels invite us to reflect on the role of the writer in postcolonial contexts. Mistry and Adiga operate within what Ashraf calls the “theories of power—ideology, hegemony, and discourse—[to] unmask the mystified reality” (Ashraf 73) of oppression. By

unveiling how the “machine” of society runs and how it “smooth[s] contradiction to appear a ‘false consciousness,’ a ‘common sense,’ and thus the absolute truth” (Ashraf 73), these writers hope to detach the aura of inevitability from unjust power relations. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry exposes how the Emergency was “a self-justifying ideological tool in the hands of power-hungry sycophants” (Mistry 436) and how its high-flown rhetoric of national unity concealed acts of atrocity and prejudice. In *The White Tiger*, Adiga “challenges the fake democracy” and the “alleged India Shining” (Adiga 15), holding up a mirror to the society that often prefers to look away. Both novels generate a form of knowledge that is inherently political, and, in this sense, it is a knowledge that empowers readers to see through the ideological fog.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *A Fine Balance* and *The White Tiger* are significant postcolonial critiques. We see how a “contrived and illusory reality” (Ashraf 73) is constructed by those in power and how that reality can be made to appear absolute until it is challenged by way of a critical engagement. Importantly, these novels also remind us that literature itself is part of the ideological struggle. It may also be stated that not all forms of hegemony are purely repressive. At times, structured power relations can possibly ensure stability, collective identity, and civic discipline. However, when such structures calcify into instruments of exclusion, they must be interrogated through the very counter-discourses literature enables. As works of art, they exercise what Foucault might term a “transformative knowledge” (*Power/Knowledge* 100). In context, both the novelists seek to empower the marginalized by allowing them to narrate their own lives and, in this sense, affirm a deeply humanistic message to assert their dignity and agency. These narratives suggest that the hegemonic darkness can surely be challenged. The process begins by way of naming the darkness, by understanding its contours, and by

envisioning the possibility of light. In this sense, *A Fine Balance* and *The White Tiger* are “halogen lights” (Adiga 321) that are provocative, illuminating, and ultimately emancipatory tools for those who seek to throw a bomb (of truth) into the apparatus of power.

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