

Can the Indigent Speak? Poverty Studies, the Postcolonial and the Global Appeal of *Q & A* and *The White Tiger**

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1. Poverty as a Challenge for Literary Criticism

In a document of the United Nations, poverty is defined as “a human condition characterised by sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights” (UN 2001). This definition reflects the current understanding of poverty—in the social and economic sciences as well as in the humanities—as lack in terms not only of material, but also human and cultural capitals. In the twenty-first century, indigence and crass social inequality have become phenomena located not only in developing countries, but also increasingly in the societies of Europe and North America. In an age of globalisation, new social walls between rich and poor are being erected everywhere. Faced with the new worldwide visibility of poverty, Poverty Studies are on the rise, and they have begun to include the analysis of literature (as well as other forms of art),¹ acknowledging, just as studies in human development have recently done,² that the literary narrative has a special capacity to present poverty as the multi-faceted experience of individual human beings rather than in the form of anonymous statistics.

Literary and cultural studies are challenged to offer approaches to such (re-)presentations, not only in light of traditions of ‘poverty literature’ which, in the English language, date back to the Middle

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkorte02023.htm>>.

Ages,³ but also with respect to theoretical questions. It is here that an important impetus comes from Postcolonial Studies—not primarily because this area of study focuses on cultures in which poverty has always been an urgent problem.⁴ Above all, issues prominent in the discussion of poverty (now and in former periods) have long been analysed for the forms of marginalisation—and resistance to them—that arise from colonial subordination: the power over and of representation (Stuart Hall), the importance of ‘authority’ (Homi Bhabha), and the ‘agency’ to act and speak for oneself.⁵ In particular, Poverty Studies frequently echoes Gayatri Spivak’s influential question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In her seminal essay, Spivak answers this question in the negative (cf. 308), and she also rejects attempts to ‘lend’ the poor a collective, homogenising and paternalistic voice.⁶

This is a position also encountered in recent discussions of poverty literature. Walter Benn Michaels (2006), for instance, who sparked a debate on the literary treatment of poverty in the US, observes that such treatment is rarely authored by the poor themselves, and that in the cases where poor people do speak for themselves, they employ forms of articulation that transcend their own class and reach privileged readers only (cf. Michaels 200). Such claims can hardly be contested. What seems more important, however, and should concern literary and cultural critics more, is the fact that *literature* has long spoken about poverty, and that there is an accumulation of literary presentations of indigent life throughout time and across cultures that has reached readers and affected the ways in which these readers imagine⁷ and take positions on poverty. It appears to be the prime responsibility of literary studies to scrutinise the modes and ideological positions of these representations, while their specific authorship seems of subordinate importance. Of course, whether subalterns are granted opportunities to speak, and to be listened to, are questions of social and ethical relevance which literary criticism must not push aside. But are the non-poor disentitled to write about poverty? Not from the point of view of Aravind Adiga who, in an interview published in *The Guardian* about *The White Tiger* (one of the novels to be

discussed below), claimed his right to write about experiences he never had himself: "I think the whole point of being in literature, of being in imaginative fiction, is to try and get under the skin of someone else and to speak in the voice of someone else [...]. That's the reason I became a writer. I never wanted to write about someone like myself" (Adiga, Interview). Do Adiga and other novelists 'steal' stories from the poor when they write about them?⁸ Do they 'ventriloquise'⁹ for them or commit acts of ethically suspicious class 'passing' of the kind George Orwell is associated with in British literature?¹⁰ Are literary treatments of poverty a fictional equivalent to 'slum tourism'¹¹?

Rather than raising questions that involve individual authorship, my subsequent discussion regards literary texts as (more or less) fictional projections in which poor people are represented and, in the specific cases to be analysed, assigned an authority to raise their voice and speak (as well as act) for themselves. Even where their authors are members of cultural elites, such texts *per se* create impressions of poor lives with a potential to impact on their readers' social imaginary. In recent years, such texts have been produced in growing numbers, to critical acclaim and often with significant performance on the (globalised) English-language book market. It appears that novels by writers with a background in post-colonies—notably in the Caribbean¹² and the Subcontinent—have been particularly successful. It might be suspected that these novels are attractive to readers in the global North because they deal with a poverty that is *not* located in the North, because they appear to deflect a problem which is also the North's by setting it in the developing world. But part of their success can also be attributed to the fact that their authors have found ways to write about poverty that depart from literary traditions of treating this theme, whether realist or sentimentalist. Such traditions were significantly shaped by nineteenth-century British cultural production (most prominently from the pen of Charles Dickens), i.e. the representational practice of a society that developed strikingly similar strategies for dealing with its indigent at home and the indigenous people of its

colonies.¹³ By providing alternatives to—and sometimes even twisting—‘familiar’ modes of poverty literature, postcolonial novels have a potential to challenge their readers’ imaginations of poverty quite beyond their immediate ‘postcolonial’ context.

The two novels by Indian authors at the centre of the following section, Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A* (2005) and Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008), were written in English with an eye on international audiences,¹⁴ and both enjoy a high visibility on the international and especially the UK book market¹⁵ even several years after their original publication. The sales figures for *Q & A* were significantly boosted when the novel was adapted for the Oscar-BAFTA-and-Golden Globe-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (UK 2008, dir. by Danny Boyle); those for *The White Tiger* as soon as Adiga was awarded the 2008 Man Booker Prize.¹⁶ Both novels are set in an India that has transformed into a tiger economy and for this fact alone depart from a literary image of India as the world’s poorhouse to which Indian writers themselves have copiously contributed.¹⁷ As portrayed by Swarup and Adiga, globalised India is still a place of abject poverty, but this poverty is now contextualised in finanscapes and mediascapes (Appadurai) that not only create new dimensions of social inequality but also present new opportunities to reject and rise from poverty—if only to a few determined individuals. It is the stories of such determined individuals that the two novels undertake to tell: the narratives of exceptional men who stand out from the millions in their country who cannot, or do not dare to, escape from social suffering. The autodiegetic narrator of Adiga’s novel explicitly identifies himself as a “white tiger,” i.e. a creature “that comes along only once in a generation” (35), capable of breaking out of the “rooster coop” in which most of the Indian poor prefer to stay. The narrator-protagonist of *Q & A* diagnoses his people’s “sublime ability to see the pain and misery around us, and yet remain unaffected by it” (84), but he himself develops a different mentality. With their exceptional central characters, Swarup and Adiga have found a means to treat (Indian) poverty in a distinctly *non*-generalised way, and they also avoid a

familiar romantic rags-to-riches pattern that promises wealth to any individual willing to work hard enough and persist in his efforts. Rather, it seems a major point of both novels to disturb preconceptions which their readers might have about poor people and how, according to these preconceptions, they might 'authentically' speak and act. What serves this purpose exemplarily is a narrative voice that endows the indigent with conspicuous agency and powers of enunciation.

2. Fictions of Agency: *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*

In both novels, highly individualised narrators have significant achievements to share: Ram in *Q & A* participates in the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, the global media franchise that promises wealth through trivial knowledge; although uneducated in any formal way, Ram wins the jackpot because he can answer all of the questions as a result of the experiences accumulated during his young and humble life. Balram in *The White Tiger* has been kept as a despised and ridiculed servant for most of his life until he murders his wealthy, westernised master and steals the money with which the latter has intended to bribe the government. With this money, Balram manages to re-invent himself as a successful entrepreneur in Bangalore, "the world's centre of technology and outsourcing" (3).

There is an undeniable social asymmetry between the novels' narrators and their authors: Swarup wrote *Q & A* while serving as a diplomat for his country in London; Adiga, the son of a surgeon, enjoyed a high-profile education at Australian schools and prestigious American and British universities before he took up a career in journalism, working for *Time* magazine, among others. This social asymmetry, which also extends to most of the novels' readers, has attracted criticism especially from Indian reviewers and critics. Criticism was particularly vehement for *The White Tiger*, especially after Adiga won the Booker—a prize, after all, that has been noted for promoting, and

helping to sell, exotic otherness (cf. Huggan). As A. J. Sebastian summarises in his article on the novel,

some Indian critics wonder if Adiga intended the novel primarily to get western readership, projecting the protagonist, getting away with his crime, being a victim of perpetual servitude [...]. Similar is the anguish of Amar-deep Singh who is perturbed by Adiga's narrating about India's poverty for a non-Indian, non-poor readers [sic], through a half baked Indian protagonist who is a sociopolitical caricature. ("Poor-Rich Divide" 242)

To the *Guardian's* Book Club reviewer too, Balram is an inauthentic narrator because his voice appears to be his author's rather than his 'own':

The frequent reminders of [the narrator's] lack of education and supposed naivety unwittingly draw attention to the sophistication of the writing. Even if it is spiced up with earthy profanities and an unembarrassed delight in scatological [sic] detail, there's no getting away from the fact that the voice of the novel, if not the viewpoint, is that of an educated, highly-trained writer—especially thanks to a frequent striving for almost Edward Gibbon-esque aphorism. (Jordison)

Q & A attracted less polemical attention, but its (rather loose) adaptation to the screen sparked a heated controversy over its alleged confirmation of stereotypes and its supposed exploitation of Indian poverty for the gratification of Western voyeurism. A reviewer of the *London Times* even referred to the film as "poverty porn" (Miles).¹⁸ Such allegations may not be unjustified, but they seem to miss a point about agency that both novels (and also *Slumdog Millionaire*) provocatively try to make—namely that the poor, once they stand out as individuals, may be quite different from what most audiences know or imagine about them. A seemingly 'inappropriate' voice can be seen precisely as *part* of this representational strategy, as Ana Cristina Mendes briefly suggests for *The White Tiger* and its narrator's command of language. To Mendes, the fact that this language seems to be at odds with the character's social background is not a flaw (as some critics have claimed), but part of Adiga's aim to undermine readers'

preconceived notions about the poor and their 'probable' capabilities: "Adiga's failure to achieve (an in itself untenable) authenticity is deliberate" (284).¹⁹

Balram in *The White Tiger* is neither a reliable narrator (he is prone to exaggerate and contradict himself), nor a likable character,²⁰ but he is conspicuously a master of trope and pithy phrase, as in the following instances:

A rich man's body is like a premium cotton pillow, white and soft and blank. *Ours* are different. My father's spine was a knotted rope [...]. The story of a poor man's life is written on his body, in a sharp pen. (26-27)

The dreams of the rich, and the dreams of the poor—they never overlap, do they?

See, the poor dream all their lives of getting enough to eat and looking like the rich. And what do the rich dream of?

Losing weight and looking like the poor. (225)

One of Balram's powerful metaphors captures the paradox of an urban poverty that is simultaneously 'there' and 'not there,' depending on point of view: While driving his master through Delhi, Balram perceives the car as a shell that protects the people inside from an outside which the rich do not wish to be aware of. Balram, however, has an epiphany when the simultaneous existence of two cities suddenly reveals itself to him:

We were like two separate cities—inside and outside the dark egg. I knew I was in the right city. But my father, if he were alive, would be sitting on that pavement, cooking some rice gruel for dinner, and getting ready to lie down and sleep under a streetlamp, and I couldn't stop thinking of that and recognizing his features in some beggar out there. So I was in some way out of the car too, even while I was driving it. (138-39)

It is rich people's ignorance of the 'other' life and what poverty means to those who have to live with it that enrages Balram so much that he will eventually kill his master. But he also raises his voice to give vent to his anger at being pushed around and humiliated by people who do everything to crush his sense of agency. He is especially outraged

at the authorities, above all the corrupt police and the law, who conspire with the rich to keep the poor in their humble state. As Balram comments:

The jails of Delhi are full of drivers who are there behind bars because they are taking the blame for their good, solid middle-class masters. We have left the villages, but the masters still own us, body, soul, and arse. (170)

Swarup's *Q & A* differs from *The White Tiger* in plot and in a more humorous, picaresque approach, but there are significant parallels between the two novels. Ram learned to speak "the Queen's English" (33) as a young child, during a brief happy period he spent with a Catholic priest. However, in his instance too the confidence and eloquence with which he narrates his struggle for survival are not what most readers would expect from a man who speaks about life in Mumbai's Dharavi slum in the first person plural—"Dharavi's grim landscape of urban squalor deadens and debases us" (157). Ram displays his acute social observation and poignant rhetoric, for instance, when he compares Dharavi to "a cancerous lump" in Mumbai's "heart" (157). The body imagery employed here is complex: Mumbai's new heart, with its glittering architecture of global capitalism, "modern skyscrapers and neon-lit shopping complexes" (157), seems aseptic—something from which the ill of poverty has been excised. The India of new wealth, like the older India of caste, has othered the poor and declared slum life "outlawed" and "illegal" (157). However, the slum is still there and, like a lethal growth, might destroy the heart from within.

Like Balram in Adiga's novel, Ram also uses his eloquence to express his exasperation about India's blatantly unequal distribution of social power:

Street boys like me come at the bottom of the food chain. Above us are the petty criminals, like pick-pockets. Above them come the extortionists and loan sharks. Above them come the dons. Above them come the big business houses. But above all of them are the police. They have the instruments of naked power. And there is nobody to check them. Who can police the police? (25)

Ram even tells most of his story while under police arrest: he has won the quiz honestly, but because the show was planned as a hoax in the first place and the producers do not have the money for the jackpot, Ram's success is 'outlawed' and, in order to cheat Ram of his prize, he is accused of having cheated himself—the accusation being constructed on the widespread assumption that the poor cannot 'authentically' have access to the capital of knowledge and must therefore be suspected of fraud when they display it.²¹ This is a prejudice—which many readers of the novel might also have—against which Ram protests explicitly and quite early in his narration:

There are those who will say that I brought this upon myself. By dabbling in that quiz show. They will wag a finger at me and remind me of what the elders in Dharavi say about never crossing the dividing line that separates the rich from the poor. After all, what business did a penniless waiter have to be participating in a brain quiz? The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. (12)

Knowledge as a human capital which the poor are denied to have is less prominent a theme in *The White Tiger*, but it is important there too because early in his life Balram is deprived of a concrete opportunity to develop his brain. An intelligent boy, he is granted a scholarship but then cannot profit from it because his family is obliged to others and he has to contribute to their income. Balram is resourceful, however, and practices self-education, acquiring knowledge useful for his later rise in the world by closely observing other people's behaviour and in particular by listening to the rich.

The two protagonists share a spirit of resistance to being victimised and sweepingly categorised.²² This spirit is revealed not only in their outspokenness, but also in their various transgressive acts. Transgressing boundaries is an element in their behaviour that Ram and Balram are quite obviously pleased with. The major transgression is that they become rich themselves. This is preceded, however, by many minor and temporary acts of class-crossing, for instance when Balram 'trespasses' into a shopping mall,²³ or when Ram crashes the dinner party of an indecently rich woman with the dead body of the

handicapped son whom she has hidden amongst the poor,²⁴ or when he once uses a hard-earned salary to travel like a middle-class man:

Looking at the typical middle-class family scene in front of me, I don't feel like an interloper any more. I am no longer an outsider peeping into their exotic world, but an insider who can relate to them as an equal, talk to them in their own language. Like them, I too can now watch middle-class soaps, play Nintendo and visit Kids Mart at weekends.

Train journeys are about possibilities. They denote a change in state. (178)

In this episode, Ram's triumph is short-lived because the middle-class family in his train compartment do not appreciate that he should enjoy the possibility of crossing the poverty line. When the train is waylaid by bandits, they make sure that Ram loses all the money he has hidden on his body. More significantly, however, Ram raises the point that a change in state may also not be part of his *readers'* imaginary of Indian poverty:

If you were to search for me in this crowded maze [of New Delhi's Paharganj railway station], where would you look? You would probably try to find me among the dozens of street children stretched out on the smooth concrete floor in various stages of rest and slumber. You might even imagine me as an adolescent hawker, peddling plastic bottles containing tap water from the station's toilet as pure Himalayan aqua minerale. You could visualize me as one of the sweepers in dirty shirt and torn pants shuffling across the platform, with a long swishing broom transferring dirt from the pavement on to the track. Or you could look for me among the regiments of red-uniformed porters bustling about with heavy loads on their heads.

Well, think again, because I am neither hawker, nor porter, nor sweeper. Today I am a bona fide passenger, travelling to Mumbai, in the sleeper class, no less, and with a proper reservation. (173-74)

By thus challenging the reader in a passage of direct address, Ram also asserts his narrative agency. The novel's strongest assertion of this agency is a significant manipulation of the reader's knowledge (quite fitting for a narrative that aims to destabilise people's ideas about what the poor can know or what kind of knowledge is a useful 'capital' in the first place). What begins as a plot of a poor man's apparent victimisation when Ram is arrested and interrogated by the

police, later turns—quite surprisingly for the reader—into a plot of cunning revenge when Ram reveals that he joined the quiz show, not in order to win a lot of money and leave his poverty behind, but in order to avenge two women whom the show's host once maltreated and humbled: a kind actress whom Ram served and who committed suicide, and a prostitute whom Ram wants to save and marry. That Ram does not narrate his story chronologically helps him disguise the true reason for his participation in the show: telling his story retrospectively to explain why he was able to answer the quiz questions without cheating, Ram points out how he came across the correct answers during various significant experiences in his life. Since his narrative follows the sequence of the quiz questions, however, its flashbacks jump from one experience to another, regardless of their sequence in time, and with many gaps such as Ram's motive for contesting in the quiz. When this motive is finally revealed, what seemed to be a story of fairy-tale luck unexpectedly turns into a story of purposeful endeavour. Significantly, at the end of the novel, Ram throws away the lucky coin that he has always claimed to consult for his decisions: "I don't need it any more. Because luck comes from within" (361). But this is a conviction he must always have had because the coin has never been useful as a decision-making device—having two identical sides. Ram's decisions, the reader learns, have always been his own; his agency has always been more important than his luck.

Balram's narrative in *The White Tiger* works without comparable tricks upon the reader but it does assert the narrator's sense of power. Balram's confidence in his voice is apparent, for instance, in his audacity to address, once more with rhetorical aplomb, the Chinese Prime Minister—eye to eye as members of Asian nations that have inherited the power of the West:

Never before in human history have so few owed so much to so many, Mr Jiabao. A handful of men in this country have trained the remaining 99.9 per cent—as strong, as talented, as intelligent in every way—to exist in perpetual servitude; a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emanci-

pation in a man's hand and he will throw it back at you with a curse. (175-76)

As this passage exemplifies, Balram has a megalomaniac streak that makes him appear ridiculous at times. However, the attributes which he ascribes to himself at the novel's beginning—"A Thinking Man," "a self-taught entrepreneur," "a man of action and change" (5-6)—are justified by his actual achievements, even if the money he gained through his crime was a major catalyst for his final success.

3. Listening to the Indigent

Q & A and *The White Tiger* are novels emerging from a postcolonial context that destabilise preconceptions about poverty and the poor. As discussed above, their narrator-protagonists are drawn as exceptional human beings in contemporary India who manage to overcome the general lethargy of the 'rooster coop' and develop idiosyncratic voices. These voices not only articulate the characters' sense of agency and achievement; they also have the power to challenge common generalisations about poverty—not only Indian poverty. But whom will the complex—and provocative—treatments of poverty in these two novels reach? What kinds of readers did their authors have in mind? Who will *listen* to the indigent as presented in these novels?²⁵

When Adiga was interviewed about *The White Tiger* and its controversial reception in *The Guardian* in 2008, his following answer refers to an intended readership in India:

At a time when India is going through great changes and, with China, is likely to inherit the world from the west, it is important that writers like me try to highlight the brutal injustices of society. That's what writers like Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens did in the 19th century and, as a result, England and France are better societies. That's what I'm trying to do—it's not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination. (Jeffries)

This statement points to an Indian cultural elite as part of Adiga's intended audience and the vision of a socially privileged author speaking to socially privileged readers about a poverty that is not their own but that they should be concerned about because it is part of their society. However, as a novel successful on the global book market (even beyond the English-speaking world), *The White Tiger* speaks to a far greater number of readers *outside* India. In the interview in question, Adiga did not comment on this segment of his readership, but his international orientation is reflected in the fact that he inscribes his novel in an eminent tradition of European social-realist writing (Flaubert, Balzac and Dickens). In the case of *Q & A*, such inscription takes place in the novel itself, notably in its playful intertextual gestures towards a 'classic' of poverty literature in English, Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. As young boys, Ram and his friend Salim are taken to a Juvenile Home for Boys in Delhi that recalls one of the most famous and popular episodes from Dickens's novel:

The mess hall is a large room with cheap flooring and long wooden tables. But the surly head cook sells the meat and chicken that is meant for us to restaurants, and feeds us a daily diet of vegetable stew and thick, blackened chapattis. He picks his nose constantly and scolds anyone who *asks for more*. (91; my emphasis)

From the home, the boys are sold to a man running a beggars' school in Mumbai, where boys are crippled to become beggars and/or trained to become pick-pockets.²⁶ As novels speaking to readers in the UK, North America and other countries in the global North, *Q & A* and *The White Tiger* can affect these readers' images of Indian subalternity, but also their imagination of poverty in general. At a time when poverty is no longer contained in an 'exotic,' 'third' world safely removed from the wealthy metropolis, the postcolonial appears to have acquired a new authority in discussing matters of poverty: in theory, but also through its literature.²⁷

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¹Cf., among others, Gandal.

²Cf. Lewis, Rodgers, and Woolcock: "Works of fiction can thus offer a wide-ranging set of insights about development processes that are all too often either ignored or de-personalised within academic or policy accounts, without compromising either complexity, politics or readability in the way that academic literature is often accused of doing. It is clear that literary works sometimes have a stronger Geertzian 'being there' quality than certain academic and policy works; they may cover aspects of development that are often not made explicit in conventional academic accounts; or, they are written in a more engaging and accessible manner. Furthermore, partly for this latter reason, works of literary fiction often reach a much larger and diverse audience than academic texts and may, therefore, be more influential than academic work in shaping public knowledge and understanding of development issues" (209).

³On late-medieval and early-modern poverty literature cf. Crassons, and Carroll; on poverty in literature of the eighteenth century and Romanticism cf. Perry, and Lloyd. On Victorian treatments of poverty cf. Smith, Williams, Tobin, Lenard, and Betensky. Kumar provides a concise overview of important treatments of poverty in English fiction.

⁴Given this urgency, Postcolonial Studies, or at least its literary branch, has given poverty comparatively short shrift. Diana Brydon has briefly discussed poverty as a 'new marginality' in postcolonial literatures; there is also a number of observations on individual writers and works (such as Chikowero, Heyns, Odhiambo, Puri, and Yenika-Agbaw). Even for India, whose poverty has been a major object of study in the historiographical branch of Subaltern Studies (cf., among others, Guha; Chakrabarty and Amin), and whose writers have often dealt with indigence, analyses of literary poverty treatments are limited (but see Nandi below).

⁵Cf. Wilson on the use of the term in Colonial and Postcolonial Studies.

⁶"The first part of my proposition [...] is confronted by a collective of intellectuals who may be called the 'Subaltern Studies' group. They *must* ask, Can the subaltern speak? [...] Their project is to rethink Indian colonial historiography from the perspective of the discontinuous chain of peasant insurgencies during the colonial occupation. This is indeed the problem of 'the permission to narrate' discussed by Said" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 283). But, to Spivak, "the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous" (284).

⁷Cf. Charles Taylor's view of the social imaginary as "the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (23).

⁸On the 'stolen stories' debate cf. Lutz (1996).

⁹Cf. Spivak: "The ventriloquism of the speaking subaltern is the left intellectual's stock-in-trade" (*Critique* 255). In the interview cited above, Adiga was

explicitly asked: "You've written a novel which ventriloquises a member of the Indian underclass. I mean you as an Oxford-educated middle-class man, you know, that takes some nerve?" (Adiga, Interview).

¹⁰On the questionable ethics behind narratives of actual cross-class passing (such as Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*) see Carolyn Betensky: "People of means who pass for poor or homeless play with, script, and dramatize relations of power. The simulation of powerlessness is an elaborate role-playing game that takes its material from the anxieties generated by lived social injustice—that is to say, social injustice lived from the side of the oppressing class" (148). She further claims that "[i]t is important to understand that the problem with dominant-class simulations of powerlessness lies *not* in the bourgeois subject's enjoyment, but in the customary and uncritical conflation of this enjoyment with the promotion of social justice. The *misrecognition* of 'powerlessness' for powerlessness is what transforms these middle-class experiments from role-playing rituals (with meaning for the middle-class role-player and those to whom the role-playing fantasy speaks) into something that gets taken for activism" (151). On the history of class-passing since the nineteenth century cf. Freeman.

¹¹Selinger and Outterson discuss actual slum tourism side by side with fictional treatments of poverty, notably in the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. On contemporary slum tourism in India also see Meschkank, who grants that poverty tourism will often be voyeuristic but can also transform the "poverty semantics" (60) of the tourists who come into a more positive evaluation of life in the slum (for example as more active and community-orientated).

¹²In his forthcoming PhD thesis, Georg Zipp discusses novels by such internationally known writers as Edwige Danticat, Junot Díaz, Earl Lovelace, and Achy Obejas.

¹³For instance, both were 'missionised' by religious groups, and the subject of extensive ethnography. Cf., in particular, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, which categorises the underclass as 'tribes': "Here, then, we have a series of facts of the utmost social importance. (1) There are two distinct races of men, viz.:—the wandering and the civilized tribes; (2) to each of these tribes a different form of head is peculiar, the wandering races being remarkable for the development of the bones of the face, as the jaws, cheek-bones, &c., and the civilized for the development of those of the head; (3) to each civilized tribe there is generally a wandering horde attached; (4) such wandering hordes have frequently a different language from the more civilized portion of the community, and that adopted with the intent of concealing their designs and exploits from them. [...] The resemblance once discovered, however, becomes of great service in enabling us to use the moral characteristics of the nomad races of other countries, as a means of comprehending the more readily those of the vagabonds and outcasts of our own" (2).

¹⁴Adiga has also published short stories about Indian poverty. For instance, "The Elephant" was published in *The New Yorker* (26 January 2009).

¹⁵Where literature from the former crown colony still enjoys particular interest.

¹⁶For *Q & A*, cf. "Q & A's Sales"; for *The White Tiger*, cf. Tivnan (2009).

¹⁷For a discussion of treatments of poverty in Indian literature (both in English and in Indian languages) cf. Nandi (2007), who diagnoses a tendency for Indian intellectuals to treat poor India as an abject other that may also become a site of projection for their own fantasies, desires and anxieties.

¹⁸For a summary of this criticism see Banaji. In a paper given at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (University of Münster, 2009), Ellen Dengel-Janic provides a more differentiated analysis of the film, proposing that its appeal "reflects not only the West's exoticism of India, but also its repressed fear and paranoia of becoming abject and poor. In times of financial crisis the very stability of cosmopolitan capitalism is shaken, and therefore, films like *Slumdog Millionaire* offer immediate relief from the Western citizen's anxiety of losing status, money and security, since, it is *there* and not *here*, that poverty can be securely located."

¹⁹This deliberation is obviously right from the novel's beginning where Adiga, through his narrator's voice, plays with the contradiction that the novel's language is English although Balram allegedly does not speak the language. As Balram says to the Chinese Prime Minister whom he addresses: "Neither you nor I can speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English" (3).

²⁰Apart from being a murderer—eventually also of his family, whom he knows will be killed in revenge of his master's death—Balram is unpleasantly boastful and has a cheap nouveau-riche taste epitomised in his fondness for his shiny silver Mac and the chandeliers which he even sports in his toilet.

²¹Indeed, Swarup claimed in an interview in 2005 that a report about access to knowledge in an Indian slum inspired *Q & A*: "I read a newspaper report that street children in India have begun using the mobile Net facility. That gave me an idea. They had intuitively understood technology. [...] I thought, why not have an unlettered person appear on a quiz show [...]" (qtd. in Sebastian, "Voicing Slum-Subaltern" 907). The project in question is 'Hole in the Wall,' which provides children in slums with free internet access via computers literally installed in walls (see Pratapchandran). This is an idea which the project's initiator Sugata Mitra is convinced can be transferred back successfully to British schools: "'The scheme means hundreds of English teachers are now teaching children in Indian slums, whilst the kids there are teaching us a thing or two about education—it's a perfect circle'" (Tobin, "Slumdog Reveals Learning Treasures" 2010).

²²Balram is so proud of this spirit that he even attributes it to his parents: He notes how his mother's foot during her cremation 'refused' to be burnt (17), and that his father, a rickshaw puller, refused to behave like the donkey as which he was treated (30). He also claims that he loves poetry because it is a form of poor man's resistance (254).

²³"I was conscious of a perfume in the air, of golden light, of cool, air-conditioned air, of people in T-shirts and jeans who were eyeing me strangely. I saw a lift going up and down that seemed made of pure golden glass. I saw shops

with walls of glass, and huge photos of handsome European men and women hanging on each wall. If only the other drivers could see me now!" (152).

²⁴"I climb on to the table, and place Shankar's body gently in the middle, in between a creamy vanilla cake and a bowl of *rasagullas*. [...]. Swapna Devi, sitting at the head of the table, clad in a heavy silk sari and loaded with jewellery, looks as if she is going to choke" (327). Ram then steals the woman's money but gives it to another poor man who urgently needs it to save his own child's life.

²⁵Cf. Spivak in an interview about her seminal essay: "So 'the subaltern cannot speak,' means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard, and speaking and hearing complete the speech act" ("Subaltern Talk" 292; cf. also Maggio). The importance of listening as a complement of speaking is also emphasised by Couldry: "Voice as a social process involves, from the start, both speaking and *listening*, that is, an act of attention that registers the uniqueness of the other's narrative" (8-9).

²⁶When Ram and Salim travel to the beggars' school, the passage is reminiscent of a famous passage in another classic of poverty literature, George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), where Orwell watches a scene in a Northern English slum from the train window (cf. Orwell 14-15). On *their* train, the boys in *Q & A* also briefly become spectators of the poverty of others: "From time to time, the train passes through slum colonies, lining the edges of the railway tracks like a ribbon of dirt. We see half-naked children with distended bellies waving at us, while their mothers wash utensils in sewer water. We wave back" (105).

²⁷This essay is part of a research project funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

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