

## Beyond Authenticity of Voice: A Response to Barbara Korte\*

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In her article “Can the Indigent Speak” Barbara Korte makes a convincing appeal to literary critics to confront postcolonial narratives of poverty such as Aravind Adiga’s seminal *The White Tiger* and Vikas Swarup’s *Q & A*. As the West gradually starts to lose its status of “an island of affluence” (Brabandt/Roß/Zwingel 9) and intellectuals are becoming increasingly aware of the need to theorize and to criticize the ever widening gap between rich and poor all over the globe, Barbara Korte’s claims could not be more pertinent. Drawing on the work of Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, and Walter Benn Michaels, Korte is aware of the fact that there is an important divide between the people who write about poverty and the actual poor who are written about in socio-critical fictions. However, she also questions the position that only those who have experienced poverty are entitled to write about it. According to Korte, writers such as Aravind Adiga and Vikas Swarup flaunt “our preconceptions” about the poor in the Third World and thus endow the “indigent” with “agency and powers of enunciation” (297).

While I couldn’t agree more with her as far as the relevance and the timeliness (and indeed the artistry) of Adiga’s and Swarup’s novels are concerned, I have some reservations concerning the notions of agency and voice that she develops. Throughout her text, Korte con-

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For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkorte02023.htm>>.

spicuously avoids the usage of the term “subaltern” and employs “indigent” instead, a term which she never defines, even though the title of her article puns on Spivak’s classic “Can the Subaltern Speak?” A reason for this might be that the term subaltern, at least in the Spivakian sense, is associated with silence, whereas Korte is interested in recuperating voice and agency. Seen from this angle, hers is an ingenious move. The flipside is, however, that, in avoiding the term subaltern, she also avoids addressing the deconstructionist framework of Spivak’s article. This framework, however, has been defining in the field of postcolonial studies. Spivak, as most postcolonial theorists, goes beyond debates of “authenticity of voice,” i.e. she does not say, as Korte implies, that only the poor can write about the poor. As Spivak states in an early interview, she does not think that “only the subaltern can speak for the subaltern or only the native can know the scene” (Arteaga 15). Her point is deconstructionist, as she focusses on the contingency of all representation. According to Spivak, every critique, however “benevolent” or radical it may be, will always have to “inhabit” the “structures of violence” that it criticizes (*Post-Colonial* 72). Therefore, serious critique always already comes “from within” (*Critique* 49). This entails that postcolonial critique will have to borrow the language of colonialism to a certain extent. For deconstructionist postcolonialists such as Spivak, there is no way of returning to a pre-colonial “origin.” Similarly, subaltern studies will always have to rely on the language of elite discourse (such as historiography or indeed literary fiction) to a certain extent—there is no “pure” subaltern consciousness. Taking her cue from Jacques Derrida, Spivak suggests that there is no vantage point for the postcolonial intellectual from which s/he can write about exploitation.

Following up on Spivak’s deconstructionist framework, I will locate *The White Tiger* within an elite discourse on postcolonial Indian identity. The “indigent/subaltern” are instrumental for this discourse, but they are not lent “powers of enunciation” (Korte 297) in any uncomplicated manner. Since my analysis requires extensive close reading, I can focus on one novel only. I have chosen *The White Tiger* as it is

particularly innovative in terms of narrative situation and tone. His narrator is not likeable, nor are we invited to identify with him. So from the first lines onwards, he does indeed challenge sentimentalized conceptions of the poor, as Korte argues quite justifiably. But even if Adiga undermines middle class clichés about the disenfranchised, he does not “assign [them with the] authority to raise their voice and speak (as well as act) for themselves” (295) in any simple way. I will demonstrate this point in three steps. First, I will examine the narrative techniques in the novel as well as the voice of Balram Halwai, its narrator-protagonist, demonstrating that there is a considerable gap between the narrating I, who is no longer indigent but a rich entrepreneur, and the experiencing I. As a second step, I will analyse the usage of animal metaphors in *The White Tiger* arguing that poor, rural India is connoted with bestiality. The last section will deal with the way subaltern India is associated with “the abject,” with disgusting things, people, and deeds. Thereby, I will show that Adiga expresses criticism, but ultimately, he also (maybe unwittingly) reifies images of the poor that seem “not only trite but offensive” (Kumar).

### 1. The Voice of the Tiger

On a formal level, Adiga’s novel is unlike much other Indian socio-critical fiction.<sup>1</sup> It defies the sentimental-melodramatic mode that is espoused by Mulk Raj Anand in his novels *Untouchable*, *Coolie* and *The Village* and by Kamala Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice* and *Nectar in a Sieve*, novels that clearly were written with an urge to improve the social situation in their historical context but are now viewed as fraught and problematic (see Khair). Also, Adiga does away with the lush exoticism often associated with more recent socio-critical works such as Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (see also Huggan), and the 19th century realist mode that Rohinton Mistry’s socio-critical novels have become famous for.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Adiga has created a narrator-protagonist with a voice that is unique in the history of Indian-

English literature: Balram Halwai is grim, in-your-face, angry and cheeky. The passive subservience of Anand's Bakha and the silent rebellion of Roy's Velutha are not for him. He does not even have a political agenda such as the Naxalite Draupadi, the heroine of Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short story of the same name. He kills his exploiter purely for his personal economic gain.

Adiga thus indeed re-writes "our" middle class preconceptions about the poor, but does so within an already existing intellectual discourse about the disenfranchised. In other words, he writes against middle class stereotypes about the poor, but he is still (and he has to be) invested in this discourse. The latter becomes evident in Balram as the narrative voice, as Balram tells his tale in retrospect, *after* he has made it from rags to riches. On his way to the top, he changes his name twice. Born as Munna (which simply means "boy") he is baptized by his teacher who calls him Balram.<sup>3</sup> Having killed his boss Ashok Sharma, Balram takes up the name of his victim as well as his upper class *habitus*. It is Ashok Sharma, killer and entrepreneur, who tells us his story. Thus, all the time we are not listening to the voice of an "indigent" as Korte suggests, but to the voice of an entrepreneur. This is particularly evident in a passage also cited by Korte:

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)

Barbara Korte correctly points out that Adiga's narrator is the master of a "pithy phrase" (299). I would like to add, however, that it is not the disenfranchised village boy Balram who utters his biting satire here, but Ashok, start-up and entrepreneur. Ashok knows about the dreams of the rich—he is one of them now. What is more, Ashok's name is reminiscent of the legendary emperor Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty, who ruled vast parts of the subcontinent in the 3rd century BC. His very name thus shows how he is now part of the elite rather than the indigent class of India.<sup>4</sup>

Along narratological lines, Ashok is the “narrating self,” and Balram Halwai/Munna are written about and could be termed the “experiencing self,” i.e. the younger self whose story is related by the older (narrating) self (see Stanzel 201). And yet, we learn comparatively little about the attitudes and feelings of Balram/Munna, as everything is already filtered through the grim perspective of the entrepreneur Ashok, who is, obviously, no longer subaltern or indigent. If he had remained subaltern, he could not have told his story in the first place. He would have neither the means nor the time to do so, as he would be slaving away in a chai-stall. Ashok, the narrating self is confident, verging on the megalomaniac, cheeky and courageous, while Balram is subservient, humble, and constantly afraid. There is thus a considerable gap between the older narrating self Ashok and the younger experiencing self Munna/Balram.

Through the merciless gaze of Ashok Sharma, entrepreneur and start-up, the *ex-Financial Times* journalist Aravind Adiga masterfully satirizes the neo-liberal rhetoric of the “new India” that is marketed all over the globe and celebrated daily in the media in India. In the following passage, Balram/Ashok refers to a radio show in which the business culture of the “new India” is contrasted with the alleged lack of entrepreneurship in China. His tone is utterly scathing:

Apparently, sir, you Chinese are far ahead of us in every respect, except that you don't have entrepreneurs. And our nation, though it has no drinking water, electricity, sewage system, public transportation, sense of hygiene, discipline, courtesy, or punctuality, does have entrepreneurs. (2)

It may well be that Ashok/Balram's satire here is an echo of the interviews with the servants, taxi drivers and riksha pullers that Adiga conducted when working on *The White Tiger*, as Korte suggests. But it is even more likely that Ashok's scathing tone echoes the sarcasm of the *ex-Financial Times* journalist who was once compelled to write articles celebrating Indian entrepreneurship. The above passage expresses middle-class disgust with the hypocrisy of the “new India” and its overblown rhetoric. It is a disgust that I share, but it is, alas, an

emotion that can only be felt by a class that is familiar with this rhetoric. Subaltern India, however, is largely cut off from the rhetoric of entrepreneurship—most chai-wallahs do not read the *Financial Times*. Again, I would conclude that Adiga's novel is much less about subaltern agency and voice and more about middle class worries about "the condition of India" (Detmers 535).

The greatest innovation in Adiga's representation of India is that he teases out how in the 21st century, the premodern and the postmodern interact in most gruesome ways. In Adiga's grim narrative, the economy in the villages still works along feudal lines, but the feudal lords are equipped with the latest SUVs, smartphones and laptops. The whole country is divided into two spaces: rural India, the slums, even Old Delhi, which are all associated with backwardness, feudalism, poverty, violence, and dirt and only called "The Darkness" on the one hand; and the "Light," i.e. the urban, globalized, rich, clean, and glitzy world of Bangalore, New Delhi and Mumbai, which is ruled by entrepreneurs, start-ups, and their respective employees on the other. As Ashok observes:

Please understand, Your Excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. (11)

Remember, Mr. Premier, that Delhi is the capital of not one but two countries—two Indias. The Light and the Darkness both flow into Delhi. Gurgaon, where Mr. Ashok lived, is the bright, modern end of the city, and this place, Old Delhi, is the other end. Full of things the modern world forgot about—rickshaws, old stone buildings, the Muslims. (215)

Adiga's analysis of the contemporary condition of India is ingenious and original. Furthermore, the gap between rich and poor he observes here is quite simply a harsh economic fact. Therefore, I would agree with Barbara Korte that Adiga draws attention to problems of the Indian poor. But this is not concomitant with endowing them with "voice." Rather, Adiga echoes older intertexts in which the shortcomings of Indian society are similarly depicted in a merciless, scathingly

critical, grim tone. Adiga even uses the same imagery as V. S. Naipaul in his seminal *An Area of Darkness* (1962). Like Naipaul 40 years earlier, Adiga is very sceptical about nationalist, romanticized images of India. What is more, Adiga, like Naipaul, writes from a diasporic position. Born in India, but educated in Australia and the USA, Adiga would share what Vijay Mishra has called the "Diasporic Imaginary" (1996). According to Mishra, being diasporic is always, to a certain extent, traumatic. He links the trauma of having been ripped from the "mother country" to the trauma of being prematurely ripped from our mother's body in our early psycho-social development (423). Mishra thus suggests that the diasporic subject will keep a strong affective tie to the "motherland" and may even come to idealize it in the process. The moment when the diasporic subject returns to the idealized motherland often renews the trauma, as the subject then realizes with a shock that neither culture nor society of the alleged homeland are ideal. On the contrary, the idealized motherland is suddenly seen as corrupt, backward, cruel and verging on the bestial. I will elaborate on these negative images of India in the next sections.

## 2. A Postcolonial Bestiary

Seen through the eyes of Adiga's narrator, India is not just an "area of darkness," but ultimately also an area of bestiality. Animal metaphors abound in Adiga's text (see also Suneetha). India is compared to a "clean, well-kept, orderly zoo" (53), driving is associated with "taming a wild stallion" (47), and Balram is constantly called "country mouse" by his fellow-servants. The four feudal lords of Balram's native village Laxmangarh are all given the name of the animal which is supposed to represent "the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him." The characters named the Buffalo, the Stork, the Wild Boar, the Raven are hardly ever called by their actual names:

[...] was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work on those lands, you had to

bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his wages. When he passed by women, his car would stop; the window would roll down to reveal his grin; two of his teeth, on either side of his nose, were long and curved, like little tusks.

The Raven owned the worst land, which was the dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze their flocks. If they didn't have their money, he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him the Raven. (21)

Ashok/Balram's tone here vacillates between cold rage and a grim humour. We do get a sense that he feels with the village folk who are oppressed, humiliated and exploited by the bestial landowners, but more importantly we can sense his utter disgust. The landowners are represented as morally and physically abject, their outward appearance mirroring their inner depravity. They are not content with just squeezing all the money out of the village people, they also enjoy humiliating them sexually. The laconic description of homosexual rape ("he liked to dip his beak into their backsides") is particularly resonant and shocking in this respect.

*The White Tiger* is indeed a postmodern animal fable that plays with older intertexts such as Aesop's fables, Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and even the medieval Bestiary, all of which are classic Western texts in which animals come to represent human flaws (or virtues). In an almost classic postcolonial move, he "appropriates" a colonial tradition, puts it into a different context and thus "abrogates" its hegemonic status (Ashcroft/Griffith/Tiffin 38-41). In other words, he employs and renews a genre (the fable) that a Western, cosmopolitan elite would be familiar with and find aesthetically pleasing. For Indian readers, or readers more familiar with the Indian context, *The White Tiger* might also resonate with the *Panchatantra*, a collection of animal fables originally composed in Sanskrit. As Sanskrit is associated with the establishment of the caste system, and the lower castes were traditionally forbidden to even hear Sanskrit, it is a very fraught language for Dalits, as subaltern castes call themselves in India. So again, he makes use of a tradition (and he does so masterfully) that is very problematic with regard to India's history.<sup>5</sup>



Moreover, the poor are depicted along equally dehumanized lines. Again and again Balram describes them as “chicken” that are trapped in a “coop” waiting to be butchered. He does seem to deplore their state, but he also expresses a sense of being disgusted by them:

The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop.

Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep the chickens there in the market. 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 and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of recently chopped-up chicken, still oleanigous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they’re next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. (147)

The “Rooster Coop” is a cruel, in-your-face allegory of modern India. Balram’s voice is scathingly, bitterly sarcastic. He criticizes the way the “chickens” are kept, and thus comments on how the upper classes treat their subaltern other. But he is also disgusted by the poor. The chickens are packed as “tightly as worms in a belly,” an image that quite literally makes our stomach turn. They peck and defecate on each other and give off a “horrible stench.” What is interesting here is that he not just abhors their physicality but their state of mind. He is appalled by “the stench of terrified, feathered flesh.” As it seems to me, he resents the subaltern for their passivity. “Why don’t they ever resist?” is the question that looms at the backdrop of Adiga’s urban bestiary.

The Rooster Coop can also be read as sardonic allegory of the caste system. What Adiga echoes here is that “caste” is based on a system of ritual purity and impurity. The lower castes are considered to be constantly impure and are hence drastically stigmatized and ostracized. This stigmatization is considered to be illegitimate among the urban middle classes, but practised in quite a few rural areas of the

Subcontinent. In an uncanny way, however, Balram's disgust for the "chicken that [...] shit on each other" echoes an upper caste fear of being "polluted" by the lower castes and a disgust about their constant "impurity." Another issue associated with the caste system is acceptance and passivity. For him (and probably for most of his middle class urban readers) the humility of the disenfranchised that, like the roosters caught in the coop, would not in any way rebel against their "butchers" is quite simply maddening. For these reasons, I find Korte's statement that the narrator-protagonists of *The White Tiger* and *Q & A* "are drawn as exceptional human beings in contemporary India who manage to overcome the general lethargy of the 'rooster coop' and develop idiosyncratic voices" (304) a bit problematic. We learn very little about the inchoate fear, pain, and rage of the people who are actually trapped in the "coop" of the caste system. Thus, I would suggest that what we are hearing here is the voice of a diasporic middle class subject who may care for the disenfranchised but is still invested in the very discourse which stigmatizes them.

In this context, it is worth noting that Adiga's narrator subscribes to a blatant individualism. In Adiga's postmodern beast fable, only the "White Tiger," the narrator-protagonist himself, breaks out of his cage. Like the animal with which he identifies, he is an exception, an anomaly. The colour symbolism is just as striking as the animal imagery in this context. The whiteness of the tiger stresses his exceptionality and rarity on the one hand, but it also points to a fraught sense of colonial or upper-caste superiority on the other.

The tiger has an important place in India's cultural imaginary. He is the vehicle of Durga, the goddess of destruction. He occurs in numerous other socio-critical Indian-English novels. The nearly extinct Sundurban tiger serves as an image of danger as well as vulnerability in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*, symbolizing subaltern rebellion and middle class fear thereof. Furthermore, the tiger is constantly alluded to in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *He Who Rides a Tiger*. Bhattacharya's narrative, which is set during the Bengal famine in 1947 and also tells a story of a lower class and lower-caste persona who breaks

with tradition, presents an interesting contrast to Adiga's novel. In Bhattacharya's novel, the protagonist *rides* the tiger (like the goddess) and thus puts himself into considerable danger. Not surprisingly, he fails in the end. Balram, however, *is* the tiger, a sublime individualist in a society of collectivists. He therefore moves beyond the conventions of the social-critical novel with its focus on collective action (see also Garajawala). As Kathleen Waller has pointed out, *The White Tiger* is a narrative about individualism, a witty, daring postcolonial Bildungsroman. However, I would argue that *The White Tiger* does not sign up for individualism as a model for Indian society in any straightforward way. After all, Balram is utterly "alone" when he "drives off with his master's car" (Gajarawala 23). What is more, he kills his boss for egotistical reasons, not because he has a political agenda of any kind. *The White Tiger* does have its share of social critique, but the revolt represented in the novel is motivated by the very discourse it attacks: individualism of the neoliberal kind. His critique of neoliberalism and social injustice thus is a critique from within. It borrows from the "structures of violence" that it seeks to undermine, as Spivak would put it (see *Post-Colonial*). This also means that his critique "falls prey" to his own work (Derrida 24).<sup>6</sup> Adiga's critique is bound to repeat or re-establish the structures he criticizes. The next section will further illustrate this point.

### 3. An Abject Aesthetics

*The White Tiger* is unsettling not just because of its lack of "realism" (see Garajawala) but also because of the pervasive presence of disgust in its depictions of rural India. In this respect, Adiga is much closer to Jonathan Swift than to Ellison or Dostoyevsky, from whom he has probably also "learnt a trick or two" (Rushdie xviii). It is disgust, rather than moral outrage, that colours and permeates the narrative. Balram is disgusted by the "horrible stench" of the chicken in the markets of Old Delhi, by the "human spiders that go crawling in

between and under the tables with rags in their hands" (43), disgusted by their sluggish looks and, more importantly, by their lack of dignity. He abhors the lack of hygiene in the servants' quarters, and particularly his chore of massaging his master's knotty feet. The most compelling image of the abject is the river Ganges which is full of filth and faeces:

Please understand, Your Excellency, [...] the river brings darkness to India—the black river. Which black river am I talking of—which river of Death, whose banks are full of rich, dark, sticky mud whose grip traps everything that is planted in it, suffocating and choking and stunting it?

Why I am talking of Mother Ganga, daughter of the Vedas, river of illumination, protector of us all, breaker of the chain of birth and rebirth. Everywhere this river flows, that area is the Darkness. [...] Mr. Jiabao, I urge you not to dip in the Ganga, unless you want your mouth full of feces, straw, soggy parts of human bodies, buffalo carrion, and seven different kinds of industrial acids. (12)

Adiga here masterfully satirizes Indian nationalist rhetoric, in which the river Ganges is depicted along mythical, idealized lines. In Adiga's narrative, the Ganges is quite simply disgusting. It is polluted with "seven different kinds of industrial acids" and associated with death and decay. Furthermore, Balram first sees the Ganga on the occasion of his mother's death and the ensuing funeral rites. She is burnt, in accordance with Hindu practice, on the *Ganga ghat*. Balram's tone when he describes his mother's funeral pyre is not so much marked by mourning and sadness, or even by blind childish grief. Instead, what Balram conveys here is a sense of horrible disgust:

As the fire ate away the silk, a pale foot jerked out, like a living thing; the toes, which were melting in the heat, began to curl up, offering resistance to what was being done to them. Kusum shoved the foot into the fire, but it would not burn. [...]

Underneath the platform with the piled-up fire logs, there was a giant oozing mound of black mud where the river washed into the shore. The mound was littered with ribbons of jasmine, rose petals, bits of satin, charred bones; a pale-skinned dog was crawling and sniffing through the petals and satin and charred bones.

I looked at the ooze, and I looked at my mother's flexed foot, and I understood.

This mud was holding her back: this big, swelling mound of black ooze. She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes were flexed and resisting; but the mud was sucking her in, sucking her in. It was so thick, and more of it was being created every moment as the river washed into the *ghat*. Soon she would become part of the black mound and the pale-skinned dog would start licking her. (14-15)

Seen from a narratological angle, this passage is one of the few instances in the text where the distance between the cheeky voice of the narrating self and the humble and subservient personality of the experiencing self grows smaller. It is one of the very few instances where the narratorial perspective shifts towards the young boy Balram and is not exclusively filtered through the perspective of the entrepreneur Ashok. In the depiction of the childhood trauma of witnessing his mother's abject death, the voice of the experiencing self, the boy Balram, and the narrating self, adult Ashok, seem to merge. The boy Balram cannot narrate his emotions of pain, sadness, and fear, as they are too traumatic, but the adult Ashok can still recall the horrible image of the burning silk, his mother's weltering foot and the terrible pale-skinned dog. To use another metaphor: we can see Balram's world, even if it is darkened by Ashok's Ray Ban sunglasses.

The young boy cannot cope with the traumatic character of the situation and the pain of losing his mother. Therefore, he fixates on the image of his mother's foot rather than reflecting upon his emotions. But what he sees traumatizes him even more. Appalled yet spellbound by the image of the burning corpse he imagines that its foot fights against being burnt. His mother's losing battle against the fire mirrors his own losing battle against the system of oppression he is caught in. Like his mother, he will be drawn into "the mud," which stands for traditional Indian mores. According to these conventions, he is doomed to remain in abject slavery. Upon realizing that "[n]othing would get liberated here" (15), Balram faints for the first time in the narrative.

Only a few lines later, Ashok's grim humour gains control over the narrative again, as he describes the broken water taps and defunct electricity poles to an absent Wen Jiabao. The trauma of witnessing

the abject funeral pyre is not just a rewriting of the myth of the suffering Indian mother, but ultimately also yet another instance where the question of subaltern voice and agency becomes extremely fraught. As I have pointed out elsewhere (*M/Other India/s; "Longing"*), subaltern India is frequently associated with the abject even in the most radical postcolonial Indian fictional texts. Anand's sweeper Rakha whose "tattered flannel shirt, grimy with the blowings of his ever-running nose, obstruct[s] his walk" (84) is only the most obvious example.<sup>7</sup>

The Darkness, as Adiga calls it, is the epitome of the abject. It is a place inhabited by "human spiders," a place where all the water taps are broken, and hygiene is but a grotesque joke, where rivers abound with faeces and pieces of dead bodies and seven different industrial acids. It is interesting to note here that this dark abject space is also associated with Balram's dead mother, who is no longer a loving, nurturing person, but a grotesque and frightening dead body. Also, there is a second, similarly monstrous mother-figure, a grotesque parody of the ever-suffering "mother India" (Bharat Mata) who haunts nationalist discourse.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the narrative, Balram's grandmother Kusum serves as the epitome of provincial backwardness. She pesters him with her demands of money, suggestions for future brides, and she keeps trying to draw him back into that abject "area of Darkness." Kusum is pictured as morally depraved, self-centred, greedy and cruel, as manipulative and cunning. She resents her son's decision to send Balram to school and nags him to: "Put him [Balram] to work in the tea shop and let him make some money" (23). Also, she takes the dowry of his cousin Kishan's wedding (42). Ashok/Balram keeps referring back to her as a "wicked old witch."

Therefore, Ashok/Balram does not simply criticize Indian village mores. He also, unwittingly, articulates a strong sense of disgust and even hatred for subaltern India, which is a far cry from endowing the subaltern with agency. These affects cannot be attributed to an alleged subaltern voice, but it is much more likely that it is part of a "diasporic imaginary," to use Mishra's phrase. The pain and anger of the exile, who, on returning to his mother country, realizes how this very coun-

try is quite literally going to the dogs (to stick with Adiga's animal imagery) permeates the narrator's cheeky voice, as does a deeply-felt disgust about the lack of hygiene, the practices of cremation, and the stifling character of arranged marriage. This is not to equate Ashok's voice with that of Adiga. The point I am making here is not about individual authorship but about the larger cultural framework within which *The White Tiger* is located. As we have seen, *The White Tiger* is a social-critical novel, but its criticism is still invested in the very discourse it seeks to undermine.

#### 4. Conclusions

*The White Tiger* masterfully plays with all sorts of intertexts from a variety of cultural and historical backgrounds thus appealing to a globalized, educated readership. With his cheeky narrator-protagonist, Adiga indeed undermines sentimentalist or exoticist images of the poor, but, ultimately, his narrator articulates a number of attitudes and affects that can be attributed more to a middle-class intellectual than "the indigent." Balram's brilliant parody of neoliberal rhetoric is informed by the expertise of the *ex-Financial Times* journalist Adiga. His general sense of being appalled by "The Darkness" echoes leftist middle-class sentiments about the apparently omnipresent corruption and lack of hygiene in India's villages. Again, it is a feeling that his globalized, educated middle class readers (and I probably have to count Korte and myself among them) will find at least vaguely familiar.

This is not to belittle the political urgency of Adiga's masterful book, nor, of course, its artistry. His analyses are timely and "raise awareness" for the plight of the subaltern. But they do so within a framework that ventriloquizes the voice of the subaltern to make more general points about the condition of India. What is more, awareness-raising is in itself an extremely problematic issue as the case of the film adaptation of *Q & A*, Danny Boyle's blockbuster *Slumdog Million-*

*aire*, demonstrates. The setting of the film, Mumbai's gigantic slum Dharavi, has now become a major tourist attraction just like Taj Mahal. Film lovers all over the globe have indeed become more aware of the problems in the slums, and more sensitive tours guided by actual social workers have also emerged as part of an awareness-raising process,<sup>9</sup> but along with that, unashamed voyeurism seems to have become acceptable, too.

Maybe, what we are left with is what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed "a politics of despair" (46), which do not entail a return to Romantic notions of authenticity, nor a wholesale rejection of Western modernity and individualism. The politics of despair requires a reading strategy that shows why the predicament which we have to criticize is necessarily inescapable. If even the most radical, the most sensitive and intelligent narratives about the disenfranchized (and *The White Tiger* is certainly among them) reify the discourse they write against to a certain degree, there may indeed be very little room for agency and voice. Seen from this angle, it seems to be all the more important to lay bare the structures of the discourse in which radical fiction is located. It may be a first step toward taking off Ashok Sharma's Ray Ban sunglasses and to try to see the world through Balram's eyes, however difficult and painful this may be.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>On the "newness" of *The White Tiger* see also Detmers.

<sup>2</sup>For an excellent discussion of realism in *The White Tiger* see Gajarawala.

<sup>3</sup>On naming in *The White Tiger* see also Suneetha.

<sup>4</sup>In my usage of the term "elite," I take my cue from the eminent historians Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee, according to whom we have to address the divide between the underprivileged, rural, often lower caste subaltern on the



one hand, and the historian who belongs to the urban, educated, typically upper-caste elite on the other. There are, of course, more classes than the two, and neither Guha nor Chatterjee would deny this.

<sup>5</sup>There is of course no such thing as a unified caste system. The very term “caste” which derives from the Portuguese “casta” (“creed”) is already fraught. There are two Sanskrit words for the phenomenon translated as caste, each of which refers to a different system: “varna,” which could also be translated as “colour,” and “jati,” which could be termed “clan.” The varna system is laid down in classical texts such as *Manusmriti* (“The Law of Manu”), but is often considered to be abstract and not important in everyday practice. There are four varnas—the Brahmins or priests at the top, the Kshatriyas or warriors come second, the Vaishyas or traders third, the Sudras or servants at the bottom. Jati, by contrast, is a system of endogamy, professional occupation and social hierarchy that is often mistranslated as “subcaste.” There are thousands of jatis that are typically associated with a profession—a “Gandhi,” for instance, is a vegetable vendour. Balram, when he talks about caste, refers to his jati, which is “sweet-maker” (on caste see, for instance, Fuchs).

<sup>6</sup>“Operating from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources from the old structure [...] the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work” (Derrida 24).

<sup>7</sup>Arundhati Roy’s Orangedrink Lemondrink Man, a monstrous pedophile who is, like Adiga’s chai-wallas, associated with the spider, would be another case in point. Images of the abject are also present in Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy* in a scene where the upper-caste protagonists visit a shoe factory. As tanning and working with leather are considered to be impure and inauspicious, these tasks are traditionally performed by Dalits, people of the lowest stratum of caste hierarchy. Like Adiga, Seth plays with upper-caste disgust for the Dalit.

<sup>8</sup>The image of the bravely suffering Indian mother, often associated with the rural lower classes such as the Halwai family, is of crucial importance in the cultural imaginary of the subcontinent, and the scene is of similar importance in the narrative. See for instance Sunder-Rajan and Ray for excellent discussions of images of women and maternity in India.

<sup>9</sup>I would like to thank Christine Vogt-William for this piece of information.

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