

Subalternity and Social Mobility in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between subalternity and social mobility in two landmark Indian English novels, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). Drawing on Gramsci's notion of subaltern classes, the Subaltern Studies collective, and Spivak's critique of representation, together with sociological accounts of caste and mobility, it argues that the two novels stage contrasting but complementary scenarios. Roy depicts a rigid, pre-liberalisation social order in which upward movement by an untouchable man is treated as a moral and bodily transgression and is punished by collective violence. Adiga portrays a liberalising economy in which mobility becomes possible for a poor man only through crime and the severing of ethical and familial bonds. Read together, the novels suggest that subalternity in India is not dissolved by economic change but reconfigured, and that for the subaltern, ascent is either forbidden or purchased at a prohibitive moral price.

Keywords: Subalternity; Social Mobility; Caste; Class; Arundhati Roy; Aravind Adiga; Indian English Novel

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1. INTRODUCTION

Indian English fiction has long served as a space in which the fault lines of Indian society are imagined, contested, and sometimes exposed to a global readership. Two novels that approach these fault lines with particular force are Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008). Separated by a decade, they belong to different moments in the history of independent India. Roy's novel looks back to the Kerala of the 1960s, a society shaped by Syrian Christian landholding families, Communist politics, and the persistence of untouchability. Adiga's novel is set in the India of economic liberalisation, a country of call centres, shopping malls, and an expanding urban middle class, but also of villages that remain, in his narrator's phrase, part of the "Darkness."

Despite these differences, both novels are preoccupied with the same question: what happens when a person born at the bottom of the social order attempts to rise? In Roy's narrative, Velutha, a Paravan carpenter, is destroyed for crossing the boundary between untouchable and touchable worlds. In Adiga's, Balram Halwai, a village tea-shop worker turned driver, climbs out of poverty by murdering his employer and appropriating his money. Neither trajectory is conventional. Each shows that the subaltern's movement is not a matter of talent or effort alone but is governed by structures of caste, class, patronage, and violence.



This article reads the two novels together through the twin lenses of subalternity and social mobility. It asks how each author represents the condition of subordination, what routes of mobility are made available or foreclosed, and what the cost of those routes reveals about the societies depicted. The central argument is that Roy and Adiga offer a diachronic critique: Roy exposes a caste order that prohibits mobility outright, whereas Adiga exposes an economic order that permits mobility only on terms that reproduce the moral violence of the old hierarchy. In both, the subaltern remains trapped between the promise of emancipation and the machinery that denies it.

2. Theoretical Framework: Subalternity and Social Mobility

The term “subaltern” entered critical vocabulary through Antonio Gramsci, who used it to designate subordinate groups whose history is fragmentary and episodic because it is always shaped by the initiative of ruling classes. Gramsci observed that even when such groups rebel, they remain subject to the activity of dominant groups, and that their autonomy is achieved only through partial and intermittent efforts (Gramsci, 1971). The concept was taken up in South Asian historiography by Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective, who defined the subaltern broadly as the name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office (Guha, 1982). The project aimed to correct an elitist historiography that credited nationalist leaders and colonial administrators with historical agency while treating peasants, labourers, and tribal communities as passive material. Prakash (1994) has noted that this project subsequently developed into a wider postcolonial criticism concerned with the politics of knowledge itself.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s intervention gave the concept its sharpest philosophical edge. Her question of whether the subaltern can speak is less a claim about literal silence than an analysis of how the subaltern’s voice is mediated, represented, and often displaced by intellectuals who speak on her behalf (Spivak, 1988). Spivak later clarified that the subaltern should not be treated as a romantic synonym for the oppressed but as a position cut off from the lines of mobility in a society (Spivak, 1999). This formulation is especially productive for the present study, because it links subalternity directly to the question of movement: the subaltern is defined partly by the absence of routes through which speech, status, and recognition can travel.

Sociological theory supplies the complementary vocabulary of mobility. Sorokin (1927) distinguished vertical mobility, which involves movement between strata, from horizontal mobility, which involves movement within the same stratum. In the Indian context, Srinivas (1966) described “Sanskritisation,” the process by which a lower caste adopts the practices and ritual norms of a higher one in order to claim better status, and noted that such change is largely positional: individual castes may move, but the hierarchy itself endures. Ambedkar (2014) argued even more radically that caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers, a graded inequality in which each group has a fixed place and a fixed degree of contempt directed toward those below. Gupta (2000) has cautioned against reducing caste to hierarchy alone, drawing attention to the logic of difference that also sustains it, but he does not deny the extent to which caste restricts movement. Bourdieu’s (1986) account of economic, cultural, and social capital further clarifies why mobility is so difficult for the subaltern. Income alone does not secure a new position; a person must also possess the educational credentials, manners, and networks that the dominant class recognises as legitimate. Empirical studies of contemporary India confirm that caste continues to shape access to education, employment, and income despite economic growth (Desai & Dubey, 2011; Thorat & Newman, 2010), and Teltumbde (2010) argues that the persistence of caste violence in the era of liberalisation demonstrates how little the new economy has altered older forms of domination. These perspectives together provide a framework for reading both novels: mobility is not simply an individual achievement but a socially regulated process, and the subaltern’s attempt to move is always measured against the structures that define who may move, how far, and at what risk.

3. The Architecture of Subordination in *The God of Small Things*

Roy's novel presents subalternity as a layered condition in which caste, class, gender, and religion intersect. The Ayemenem household of the Ipe family is itself an arena of hierarchy. The Syrian Christian family, proud of an imagined descent from Brahmins, maintains distinctions of purity and pollution even within a faith that officially rejects caste. The novel makes this irony plain in its treatment of the Paravans, who converted to Christianity in the hope of escaping untouchability but found that the church offered them separate services and no genuine equality. Their conversion shifted their religious label without altering their social position, a pattern that confirms Srinivas's (1966) observation that changes of practice do not by themselves dissolve the structure of hierarchy. Velutha, the Paravan carpenter, embodies this subaltern condition most fully. Roy recalls a history in which Paravans were expected to remove their footprints from the paths of caste Hindus and to avoid polluting the touchable world with their shadows. Velutha's family, particularly his father VellyaPaapen, has internalised this subordination to the point of gratitude, reflecting what Gramsci (1971) would identify as the way ruling-class dominance is secured not only by force but through consent and habit. VellyaPaapen's horror at his son's behaviour, and his willingness to betray him, shows how the subaltern can be made complicit in the preservation of the order that oppresses him. Women in the novel occupy a parallel position of subordination. Ammu, the divorced daughter of the family, has no property rights to speak of, no secure place in her parents' home, and no standing in the eyes of her community. Chakravarti (2003) has argued that caste hierarchy depends on the control of women's sexuality, particularly through endorsement of endogamy, so that the regulation of desire becomes a central instrument of caste reproduction. Roy's "Love Laws," which prescribe who should be loved, how, and how much, dramatise precisely this mechanism. Ammu's transgression, her love for a man outside the permitted boundaries, threatens the entire structure and therefore calls forth a disproportionate response. Her subalternity is thus doubled: she is subordinate as a woman within the family and endangered as a lover who crosses the caste line.

4. Mobility as Transgression: Velutha and the Limits of Ascent

Velutha is the most striking instance of mobility in the novel, and its treatment is subtle. He is not a social climber in any conventional sense. He does not seek to alter the caste order; rather, his skills, education, and character cause him to occupy a position that the order cannot accommodate. Trained at the school established for Paravans by missionaries, and further educated in carpentry by a German visitor, he becomes an exceptionally gifted craftsman and an indispensable worker at Paradise Pickles and Preserves. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms, he accumulates considerable cultural capital in the form of technical skill and embodied competence. Yet the novel repeatedly shows that such capital cannot be converted into social recognition. Mammachi acknowledges his talent but pays him less than a touchable carpenter and more than a Paravan labourer, a calibrated wage that mirrors the exact gradation Ambedkar (2014) identified as the essence of caste.

The limits of his ascent become fully apparent when his relationship with Ammu is discovered. The offence is not merely sexual. By entering the bed of a Syrian Christian woman, Velutha violates the boundary on which the entire social arrangement rests. The reaction of the family, in which Baby Kochamma manipulates the police and the young Estha is coerced into betraying him, is a coordinated defence of hierarchy. The police who beat Velutha to death at the History House act not as individuals but as agents of an order that has designated him as polluting. Roy's narration of this scene insists that the violence is not an aberration but the logical enforcement of the rules that govern the society.

Equally significant is the failure of the institutions that might have supported him. Comrade K. N. M. Pillai, the local Communist leader, withdraws his support when it becomes politically inconvenient, and the Party's class-based analysis proves unable or unwilling to address caste as an independent axis of oppression. This episode illustrates a point frequently made in Dalit critique,

namely that class-oriented politics in India has often neglected the specific character of caste discrimination (Teltumbde, 2010). Velutha's fate also confirms Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern's speech is mediated: he never narrates his own story, and the official account of the events is fabricated by the powerful. The novel itself becomes the act of recovery, restoring a voice to a figure the society had erased.

5. The Rooster Coop: Constructing the Subaltern in *The White Tiger*

Adiga's novel opens from a different vantage point. Balram Halwai narrates his life in a series of letters to the Chinese Premier, who is expected to visit Bangalore, and he presents himself as a successful entrepreneur who has learned the truth about India. His story begins in Laxmangarh, a village in what he calls the Darkness, a region marked by absent schools, rapacious landlords, and a political system that offers elections without real choice. His caste name, Halwai, designates sweet-makers, and he remarks that the caste is destined for a narrow, hereditary occupation, even though he is pulled out of school early to work in a tea shop and to repay his family's debts.

The most important image in the novel's analysis of subordination is the Rooster Coop. Balram observes that, in the poultry markets, roosters wait calmly in cages stacked in full view of the butcher, never attempting to escape even as their fellows are slaughtered. Indian society, he claims, is organised on the same principle: the poor remain in their coop because they are bound by family, by loyalty, and by the fear that any attempt to escape will result in the destruction of their relatives. This metaphor extends Gramsci's (1971) insight about consent. The poor are not simply constrained by external force; they have been trained to police one another and to regard their own servitude as a natural or even honourable condition. The servant's loyalty to the master, which Balram observes in his fellow drivers, is the equivalent of VellyaPaapen's gratitude in Roy's novel.

Adiga's subaltern is also a creature of the new economic order. Balram's employer, the Stork, owns coal mines and bribes politicians; his sons Ashok and Mongoose have returned from abroad or live in urban comfort, yet they remain implicated in the networks of corruption that sustain their wealth. The servants inhabit basements and sleep on cockroach-infested floors beneath the shining apartments of Delhi. This spatial arrangement dramatises the persistence of subordination within the growth economy. Teltumbde (2010) and Desai and Dubey (2011) have argued that economic growth in India has left intact, and sometimes intensified, inequalities of caste and class. Adiga's city is a literary rendering of that claim: the glass towers of the Light depend on the invisible labour of those who are denied access to it.

Balram's education is characteristically incomplete. He describes himself as half-baked, having learned enough to recognise his condition but not enough to qualify for any of the formal routes of advancement. The deficiency in cultural capital that Bourdieu (1986) describes is therefore explicit in the novel. Balram can drive, read signs, and listen attentively to his master's conversations, but he cannot translate these competences into a legitimate position. His only credential is the observation, made by a school inspector, that he is a rare creature, a white tiger, and this remark gives him an imaginative sense of exceptionality that sets him apart from those around him and prepares him to break the coop.

6. Mobility as Crime: Balram's Ascent

Unlike Velutha, Balram does rise. He moves from village to city, from tea shop to car, and ultimately from servant to owner of a taxi company in Bangalore. On the surface the trajectory appears to vindicate the promise of the new economy, in which talent, initiative, and nerve can overcome a poor start. Many early readers received the novel as an account of the rise of an Indian entrepreneur. Yet the narrative systematically undermines this reading. Balram's decisive step is the murder of Ashok, whom he strikes with a bottle before taking a bag of money intended as a bribe. His ascent is therefore founded on theft and homicide, and its price includes the deaths of his own family, who, as he knows, will be killed in retribution by the Stork's agents.

This outcome reveals the novel's distinctive argument about mobility. In a society in which legitimate channels are blocked, because education is inadequate, caste networks control employment, and patronage determines advancement, the subaltern can move only by transgressing the very norms that the society claims to uphold. Balram's crime is not presented as a moral triumph so much as a rational response to a corrupt system. He insists that every successful man in India has committed a crime of some kind, and the novel gives sufficient evidence of corruption among the elite to lend this claim plausibility. In effect, Adiga shows that the formal distinction between legality and illegality does not separate the ruling class from the subaltern but merely distributes the opportunities for crime unevenly.

The novel's ending raises further questions about the nature of Balram's mobility. Having changed his name to Ashok Sharma, he assumes the identity of his victim and refashions himself as a respectable businessman. He bribes the police, treats his drivers as he was once treated, and describes himself as an entrepreneur. Srinivas's (1966) concept of Sanskritisation is oddly relevant here, since Balram's ascent involves the imitation of the practices and the vocabulary of the dominant group. But whereas Sanskritisation is typically a gradual process of group adaptation, Balram's change is individual, abrupt, and violent. He escapes the coop without dismantling it. His new position may be read as horizontal as well as vertical in Sorokin's (1927) sense: he moves into the master class, but the structure of master and servant is unchanged, and he becomes an agent of its reproduction.

Critics have questioned whether the novel can be read as a genuine critique of inequality or whether it caters to a global appetite for narratives of an exotic, dark India. Mendes (2010) argues that the novel's depiction of poverty and corruption is shaped by the expectations of Western readers and risks flattening the complexity of Indian society into a spectacle. The point is relevant to Spivak's (1988) discussion of representation: Balram speaks with apparent freedom, yet his confession is addressed to a foreign dignitary, and his voice is mediated through the conventions of the picaresque. The novel thus both gives voice to a subaltern figure and exposes the problems attendant on such representation, since Balram's entrepreneurial self-presentation is itself a form of performance, shaped by the discourse of the market.

7. Comparative Discussion: Prohibited Ascent and Purchased Ascent

Placing the two novels side by side reveals both continuities and contrasts. The first continuity is the structural role of consent and complicity. Roy's *Vellayappa* and Adiga's *Balram*'s family and fellow servants all participate in the maintenance of their own subordination, whether through gratitude, fear, or loyalty. Both novelists thereby extend Gramsci's (1971) insight that domination operates through the cooperation of the dominated. The *Love Laws* and the *Rooster Coop* are, in this sense, parallel metaphors: each names an ideological system that distributes punishment and reward so that deviation seems unthinkable.

The most important contrast lies in the pathways of mobility. Velutha's excellence is recognised but cannot be legitimately rewarded; Balram's ambition is rewarded but only because he abandons legitimacy. In Roy's world the subaltern's capital is cultural and moral, and it is rendered useless by a caste order that refuses to recognise it. In Adiga's world capital is economic, and it can be seized, but the act of seizure destroys the very bonds of solidarity that might have supported a collective emancipation. The contrast can be summarised by saying that Roy depicts mobility as prohibited, while Adiga depicts it as purchased. Neither offers the liberal ideal of mobility as a fair reward for merit.

A third point of comparison concerns gender. Roy's *Ammu* is the novel's second major casualty, and her story shows that caste and patriarchy operate jointly to constrain women's mobility, both physical and emotional (Chakravarti, 2003). Adiga's novel is far more reticent about women: they are largely absent or peripheral, and the one prominent female figure, Pinky Madam, is more a

symptom of her husband's household than an autonomous agent. This difference partly reflects the narrative position of Balram, whose horizon is that of a male servant, but it also limits the novel's analysis of subalternity. In Guha's (1982) sense of the subaltern as defined by multiple axes of subordination, Roy's novel is the more comprehensive; Adiga's is the more focused on the economic dimension.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that *The God of Small Things* and *The White Tiger* offer complementary analyses of subalternity and social mobility in modern India. Roy portrays a caste order in which the subaltern's attempt to move across boundaries of pollution, desire, and class is regarded as an offence that must be punished with violence. Adiga portrays a market society in which the subaltern may move, but only by means that replicate the cruelty and corruption of the system he escapes. In the first novel, mobility is forbidden; in the second, it is purchased through crime. In both, the underlying structure of domination remains largely intact.

Finally, the novels suggest that genuine emancipation cannot be reduced to individual escape. Velutha's death and Balram's crime point, in different ways, to the same conclusion: as long as the structures of caste and class remain unaltered, any individual movement will either be crushed or absorbed. The ethical force of both works lies in their refusal to offer a consoling narrative of success. They ask readers to consider not how a single subaltern might rise, but what kind of society would make rising unnecessary as an act of exception, and would allow the small things, and the people who embody them, to be heard.

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