

Kleidoscopic Shades of Indian Life in *the God of Small Things*, *Q & A* and *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

Social, economic, cultural and psychological phenomena of Indian life have been very artistically captured by Arundhati Roy, Vikash Swarup and Aravind Adiga in their fictional worlds. The shades of social and economic life have been unraveled through prevalent neo-feudalism, ongoing class struggle and misery of have-nots in the social construct based on strong hierarchical caste system, deep rooted corruption in every walk of life, social norms and codes hinging upon strong (Feminism) patriarchy, archetypes, stereotypes; man-made cultural, communal, regional barriers, etc.

The God of Small Things is an artistic endeavour to lay bare kaleidoscopic psychological barriers, predicaments, confrontations; Roy boldly raising the voice of subalterns and women with her feminist streak. Female characters like Ammu, Mammachi et al. represent gender struggle of women even in post-modern settings as they do try to put resistance to the norms, dogmas, laws, values and structures typical patriarchal but parish to the phallo-centric establishments in Indian society.

In *Q & A* and *The White Tiger* phenomenon of unending clash between all powerful society and rebellious individual has been brought into fore artistically; yet both the writers have not finished with tragic notes of their individual protagonists' surrender to age-old social and cultural forces. What Swarup and Adiga have endeavoured to explore here is the politics of hierarchical system in Indian society as this hierarchy has ground on economic, communal, caste and feudal ethnicity. Both the novels lay bare common reality of deep rooted cynicism of society to the ascendance of protagonists from the chasm of misery and humiliation.

It is critically pronounced fact that a creative writing is the end product of the age and society in which it is produced; primary pre-occupation of the writer is to artistically put forth certain facets of individual predicaments, emotional makeovers, social and cultural shades of the slice of life. All writers from classical to postmodern reveal the impact of their time and milieus. The Japanese contemporary writer and thinker Norio Okaguchi's words substantiate this truth and deserve mention here: "Each language is unique and its literature provides insight into a nation's history, the lifestyle of people and their culture."¹ Indian literature has been the true epitome of social, economic, cultural and psychological representation of Indian life. There is true artistic representation of various shades of social, economic, cultural and psychological phenomena of Indian life in the selected novels of Arundhati Roy, Vikash Swarup and Aravind Adiga in their fictional worlds.

The history of India is, in fact, the history of feudal system and caste system which has witnessed the suffering and exploitation of working class peasants and comforts for the privileged class. Applying to present day social scenario the concept of feudalism here is not be narrowed down just within the peripheries of typical agrarian setup. Rather it is mindset even when there is so-called democracy; as this practice is the part of the culture. As the colonialism has not come to an end and continues in the different forms, in the same way, feudalism, though in changed form, still continues to dominate the Indian cultural minds. Traditional feudal system denotes the exercise of *fealty*, which was a promise or loyalty from the labour class, between *suzerain*, the land owner or authority, and *vassal* or *vassals*, the working poor peasants.

The God of Small Things is a saga of wretched hearts which have been fated to sullen life thanks to traditional social system in India based on feudalistic mind set. Ridden with feudal mentality Babu, Ammu's husband and big snob for the West, goes to the extent of offering his wife to white skinned employer as if she is his property to use the way he desires. Roy here makes the things sound ironical as this vassal (Babu) sees indefinite powers in the suzerain i. e. white master in the business of tea plantation, an agrarian setting, and Ammu being the fealty or loyalty; in fact this is the shameful act of disloyalty of a man who is engrossed blindly in patriarchy and snobbery. This feudal way of life is so inculcated in familial and social system that poor Valutha has to pay dearly for making free choice of venturing out to love high caste Ammu. He has to pay for this blunder at the cost of his life since he belongs to low caste. Ammu is projected by Roy to be the representative of modern women of freedom as reckoned by Murari Prasad, "Ammu's rebellion against maternal and marital conventionality, and finally, her liaison with dark-skinned and untouchable Velutha constitutes a violation against a determinate social order, sponsoring the immutable love laws."² Though, female protagonists like Ammu and Rahel have freedom of choice, yet this feudal ways in collective unconscious force them succumb to the system. Irony goes in big way when even so-called Marxists leaders reveal feudal character when put onto anvil of testing in helping a low caste Valutha.

The White Tiger is a satirical representation of the Indian feudal realities and that is why this novel has attained the heights of universality. This is a brilliantly crafted novel in the form of seven letters which the protagonist, Balram Halwai, the mouthpieces of Aravind Adiga and the narrator, writes to the Chinese Premier laying bare the realistic account of the dark land called India. Applying his artistic insight Adiga discerns certain segregationist dualities which characterize present day India. He projects rather two worlds viz. darker India--- the hinterland, away from the coastal enlightenment, and the light India having the vastness of sea; two classes of human animals living in this jungle viz. bellied, the ruling class and the non-bellied, the ruled ones, the poor working class.

In fact, this novel is a panorama of Indian dystopic jungle wherein only socially and economically powerful animals would thrive in conformity with the jungle law of *might is right*. In this post-colonial chaotic society, as the novel symbolically projects, motley animals and beasts hunt and bully the weaker ones and the perennial cycle of exploitation and injustice goes on though in more sophisticated form. Adiga sees the irony of this

social system and satirically describes ancient Indian society as a systematic zoo wherein order prevailed owing the strong cultural discipline based on the division of work:

See, this country (India), in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo. A clean, well-kept, orderly zoo. Everyone in his place, everyone happy. Goldsmiths here. Cowherds here. Landlords here. The man called a Halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows...³

The social scene of the village Laxmangarh, the native place of the protagonist Balram which serves as the microcosm of typical Indian darkness, reveals the ugly but real facet of India as there does not prevail democratic ways but the influence and rule of feudal landlords who are symbolically described as the mighty animals in this jungle where they are free to hunt and kill. This jungle consists of the beasts, animals and birds of different types and the roles have been assigned to them befitting their status and ethnicity.

The symbolic representation of human beings in the form of certain animal species is the artistic endeavour of the novelist to aesthetically propound the idea of feudal hegemonies prevailing in the country. The four domineering landlords viz. Buffalo, Wild Boar, Raven and Stork rule Laxmangarh; they have been given the symbolic naming in conformability to the propensities of the animals they represent. The Stork, having parasitical propensities and adept at killing, is the prototype of typical feudalism replete with avarice, debauchery, arrogance, insensitivity and other vicious attributes which bring forth his image of being *red in tooth and claw*:

The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flows outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village.⁴

It is in conformity with the species' propensities that Adiga ascribes the role in the jungle of exploitation and free hunting. The Stork feeds himself through the watery ways since the boatmen and the fishermen are bound to nourish him at the cost of their maintenance. Balram is the chauffeur to the Stork who puts him through the mill in multiple tasks such as cooking, sweeping, washing and massaging his dirty feet etc. The man having the special capacity of gluttony who can eat up abundance of riches and exploit the poor are described as Buffalo, "The Buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, and each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him."⁵

The practice of novel type of feudalism in democratic India is not only restricted to rural India or what the novelist called dark India but it stretched to urban jungle too with different colourings though. In modern urban India the rich ruling class enjoy the

constant services of *half-baked* Indians or *human spiders* in the form of chauffeurs, rickshaw-pullers, cooks, sweepers and other domestic help. In posh colony of Gurgaon Ashok's royal pomp is maintained through constant servitude of Balram who drives, cooks, massages, nurses this feudal landlord family. The culmination of feudal exploitation of the poor and the ever prevailing sense of servitude is delineated by the novelist when in urban democratic settings of NCR Pinky, the ultramodern wife of Ashok, runs over an urchin when driving out in hobby in inebriated condition and Balram is expected to happily prove his loyalty by taking blame on himself:

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

I, Balram Halwai, son of Vikram Halwai, of Laxmangarh village in the district of Gaya, do make the following statement of my own free will and intentions:

That I drove the car that hit an unidentified person, or persons, or person and objects, on the night of January 23rd this year. That I then panicked and refused to fulfil my obligations to the injured party or parties by taking them to the nearest hospital emergency ward. That there were no other occupants of the car at the time of the accident. That I was alone in the car, and alone responsible for all that happened.

I swear by almighty God that I make this statement under no duress and under instruction from no one.

Signature or thumb print:

(Balram Halwai)⁶

This affidavit clearly indicates the condition of poor people in India and the utter futility of democracy but the feudal mentality and practice wherein the poor sacrifice their lives for the betterment of the landlords. The peril of the shift of blame is somehow evaded by black clad clever agents of feudal rich as there is no need realized to pursue the case of the killing of an poor urchin. Typical feudalized and enslaved Kussum, Balram's granny, very heartily welcomes this incident with excitement as if she assumes herself the mother of a martyr; the patriot granny who has offered her child for motherland. Along with her the other family members too take pride in the fact that their boy has been chosen by the fate to be useful for their masters. The feudal mentality is so profound for the poor that they find no value of freedom in their lives. Rather they are adept to depend on the mercy of the rich landlords that they have degenerated into the robotic slaves caught in the tune of their panegyrics, sycophancy and utter slavery even in twenty first century.

This continuous practice of feudalism in the form of neo-feudalism has enslaving characteristics and Adiga has laid bare this grim reality of Indian servitude with the novel concept of Rooster Coop. A half-baked average Indian is born with the firm conviction of

never thinking of crossing the peripheries of conventions set by the social forces. The Rooster Coop within which these people are conditioned to live and die is actually protected from inside as the fellow beings from the poor community put every possible spoke into the wheel of anyone who tries to escape and excel in life. Adiga, very clearly describes the practices making the Rooster Coop work properly and let the ceaseless cycle of hierarchical system go on, “No. it’s because 99.9 per cent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market.”⁷

In the past the basic factor behind the prevalence of this practice of feudal system was economic as was in Europe. But Indian feudalism characteristically evolved in conformity with strong caste system based on the hierarchy of professions. Ancient political and religious treatise, *Manusmriti* of political thinker Manu is considered the basis of the Indian caste or class graded system since ancient Vedic times. Great modern reformist and thinker Dr. B R Ambedkar has quite impeccably brought forth the very stricture of this widely acclaimed treatise of graded class system in his essay “**Untouchability and the Caste System**” by finding the analogy between caste system and feudal system. This practice, which was introduced by the Indian political god Manu for stability in society, gradually evolved into caste system and thus feudalism dominated the society. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar has analyzed this doctrine critically in this essay:

In a social system based on graded inequality the possibility of a general common attack by aggrieved parties are not on common level. This can happen only when they are only high and low. In the system of graded inequality, there are the highest (Brahmins). Below the highest are the higher (the Kshatriyas). Below the higher are those who are high (Vaishya). Below the high are low (Shudra) and below the low are those who are lower (the Untouchables). All have the grievance against the highest and would like to bring about their downfall. But they will not combine. The higher is anxious to get rid of highest but does not wish to combine with the high, the low and the lower lest they should rise to his status and become his equal.⁸

With the passage of time this hierarchical system gradually aggravated the Indian social scene; it became the common practice to keep those born in lower strata suppressed in miserable conditions. The graded system was so craftily designed that the components of it should have some inherent interest to maintain it this idea illustrated by this great social reformist. Brahmin, the top most in hierarchy, for example, does not fear lose his supremacy over others as the Kshatariya, the next in hierarchy, also enjoys supremacy over others viz. Vaishya, Shudra etc. any rebellion on his part notwithstanding. Shudras, the lowest in rank found untouchables below them who were squarely unequipped and deprived for any right for them. The life has been abject for them for centuries, yet the cycle of caste system goes on unchecked and unaffected by the upheavals in human history.

Such feudalistic stereotypes plays vital role in bringing the lives of orphan children like Ram Mohammad Thomas into wretched condition as in the novel *Q & A*. Vikash Swarup painstakingly provides detail of the life of the domestic servants; how the sense of servitude is built that leads to colonial perpetuation in the minds of the people. The peculiarity and mundane sensibility in the name of the protagonist viz. Ram Mohammad Thomas represents the idea of one's integrated cravings for recognition; the name signifying all three major religions of India. The utility of this name has market value to be utilized and taken advantage of any religion.

He spends his childhood in missionary arrangement; works as domestic aide in Christian family of Mr. Taylor in the embassy of Australia. The boy lives with staunch Hindus in Agra and in Dhavri Slums. He has Muslim friend Salim; also he works with a Muslim underworld employer. Such ways and tactics involving the religious business into use carries the hint of one's vulnerability to all towering religious authority. A chap, representing millions of Indian chaps, practically succeeds in roosting his goose in heterogeneous people of ethnicity is bound to learn and adept to the ways of hypocrisy, servility, sycophancy and thus servitude.

Since religion has been the greatest and unchallenged force in many societies including Indian, this has been the chief nourishing factor in the development and flourishing of the twin systems viz. caste and feudal system; ever keeping the firm grip on the minds of god-fearing and religious orthodox Hindu. Had these twin practices been restricted to the fact of strengthening the economy of the state only there would have ensued radical transitions in cultural and social life in India; feudal system might have been reduced to nothingness by the mutinous efforts of working and lower classes. But sanctimonious connections of feudal-cum-caste system to all powerful religion have ever protected this set up and it remained prevalent forever. The unchecked feudalistic practices, patriarchy and caste system backed by the stereotypes of religion have helped corruption in Indian social life take deep footings. Motley shades of corruption find ample echo in these novels in the form of stigma of child abuse, incest, palpitated condition of education, health, police, law and order and other essential aspects.

Sullen and gloomy lives of Estha and Rahel owing to bad treatment in the society tell the situation of children pathetic condition. Constant chiding, scolding, forced discipline of snobbery, cynicism of elders for them, corporal punishment and sexual abuse lay bare the truth of the twisted plastic minds. When Estha is subjected to erotic stimulation by Orange and Lemmon man Ammu, the mother should be the protecting shield for innocent child, but ironically she rebukes the child and takes the side of villainous offender. Estha has to be through gloomy experiences of sexual abuse, yet he has to endure this agony as a child since no one in the family, including Ammu, would listen to him.

Millions of Indian are blind, mindless, to follow this impulse as depicted in *Q & A*. The chapter , 'A Thought for Crippled' extensively explores this grim and shameful reality; Mr. Gupta and party choose children from slum and exploit them sexually, mentally emotionally and socially, "...He strokes Salim's face, tracing his fingers over his bony nose and thin lips. Then abruptly he orders, 'Take off your shorts.' Salim is confused by this request. 'Just do as I say, bastard, or I will give you a tight slap,' Gupta snarls."⁹

Children are found to be soft target for this slavish call of impulse to fulfil. Such shameful actions devoid of reason and rationale imply the fact of Indians being governed by the darker and arcane forces. Apart from child abuse other shameful evils like incest is another blot on Indian society. Shantharam, the dejected astronomer in the chawl of Dhavari attempts rape on his own daughter, Gudiaya. The frustration in convention-ridden society leads one to such slavish impulsive and shocking act.

Education is the base of civilization and human development and thus it is right for all. Adiga skillfully unravels the very sorry state of affairs in basic education in dark India through the case of the Balram Halwai in school, "There was supposed to be free food at my school—a government programme gave every boy three rotis, yellow daal, and pickles at lunchtime. But we never saw rotis, or yellow daal, or pickles, and everyone knew why: the schoolteacher had stolen our lunch money."¹⁰ It is interesting to note how the villagers' justify this shameful act, "No one blamed the schoolteacher for doing this. You can't expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet."¹¹ Every aspect of life is so engrossed in corrupt ways and fashion that no one is disturbed with such degeneration of the society rather people justify such unscrupulous ways of life. Similar dystopian picture of Indian corrupt system is drawn by V. S. Naipaul, whose influence on Adiga seems to be in at some degree, in *An Area of Darkness*:

Symbolic action: tree-planting week (seventy per cent of the tree planted die from lack of attention after the speeches), smallpox eradication week (one central minister is reported to have refused to be vaccinated for religious reasons, and vaccination certificates can be bought for a few shillings from various medical men), anti-fly week (declared in one state before the flies came), children's day (a correct speech by Mr. Nehru about children on the front page of the newspaper and on the back page a report that free milk intended for poor children had found its way to the Calcutta open market), malaria eradication week (HELP ERADICATE MALARIA daubed in English, on the walls of illiterate Hindi-speaking villages).¹²

A society which is educationally flawed, there runs corruption at even elementary level, other aspects of such society in no way can be unaffected since education is the basic tool to fight the corruption. Health, after education, is the primary responsibility of the government but this area is more deteriorated in terms of providing medical facilities to the citizens. There runs deep rooted corruption in health department as the public money is siphoned and India's progression in medical fields is boasted by the politician on papers as Balram in *The White Tiger* warns the Chinese Premier Mr. Jianbao. He states that on paper shown to foreign dignitaries and produced at international organization like WHO India is shown marching with good pace on the path leading to healthy world and thus grants and charities or billions are fetched in. The cycle of disparity between haves and have-nots would go unchecked when the latter class, the dalits, have no faith in the

appointed agency of law and order i. e. police; the feudalistic rich can manipulate the squarely corrupt police in the way they want to meet their selfish end. Balram practically puts on anvil this easy-going cynical police system who has slavish attitude to rich and bullying to the poor. Besides social and cultural representation certain psychological shades of typical modern life such as snobbery for the West, Raj hangover, cynicism against the underdogs etc. are also included in the act of artistic delineation of life in these novels.

The instances in the rather sullen narrative of *The God of Small Things* bring forth the fact of deep rooted snobbery for the Western Ways of life. Extraordinary treatment to Sophia Mol and her mother Margret Kochamma tells the sorry state of affair of Indian mentality of high snobbery to West. Rahel and Estha are cut to lower size when compared to 'angelic' Sophie Mol. In order to be up to the level of civilization of their half-British cousin, the twins Estha and Rahel are forced to practise their English pronunciation, and they are forbidden to speak Malayalam, their mother tongue, even among themselves. They also have to witness the excitement provoked by the arrival of Sophie Mol, a reaction that spells out for the unfortunate twins their lower racial status and "fatherless" situation. These distinctions between the children, imply wider racist schemes of social reference, the stereotypes of colonial hangover, "Kochu Maria took both Sophie's hands in hers, palms upward, raised them to her face and inhaled deeply....tender London hands clasped in calloused Ayemenem ones."¹³

Pappachi's passion and apprehension for his status in society; his British leanings and snobbish attitude are the example of Raj hangover in India. One typical streak of Indian character Arundhati Roy has artistically laid bare is the bullying and stooping to power and authority. Baby Kochamma, an aged spinster and hypocrite, is a grotesque character epitomizing snobbery, bullying to weaker and servility to contingent authority. For the people like her the sun always rises from the West. This politics of behaviour is widely practiced in India and carries the seeds of colonialism. Pappachi is also highly snobbish character who is caught in Raj hangover; 'Imperial', 'Entomologist' an anglophile who likes to be recognized as an anglicized gentlemen.

Social cynicism is another shade of life which constitutes the basic attitude of the society in general; the attitude based on structured mindset. The entire scheme of the novel *Q & A* hinges upon a game show W3B and it is through this show that Vikas Swarup has tried to present the fact of slum dwelling underdogs having hold on knowledge and wisdom too. It is against the backdrop of this show that Swarup has skillfully laid bare composite facets of Indian social scene wherein hell-bound poor labour class is supposed to be destined within the seeming world of destitute. Being orphan child protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas has never been exposed to formal education at all yet his training and constant learning through odd experiences in the school of life has bestowed him with special abilities. Swarup has deployed chance factor with rich fictional elements in associating the live events to the set of questions asked in the game show, Well, wasn't I lucky that they only asked those questions to which I knew the answers?"¹⁴

The victory as a defining moment in his life is overtaken by the cynicism of a world which creates little identity boxes and keeps people in them; seldom allowing them to break the mould and become rich. The poignancy of the plot is mirrored in the travails of Ram, without being lost in the convolutions. Thomas has to face fateful fury of social authorities as he is alleged of cheating; arrested and interrogated for possible trick. The beginning of the novel strikes a powerful note with its protagonist being under police interrogation and torture for allegedly having duped in big game show. The authorities blaming him rest their conviction on the fact that this game show is so tactically devised that even highly pedantic minds cannot possibly go beyond answering half of its total questions; how someone devoid of any formal education and who has not basic idea of even simple general knowledge can pick right options.

Such cynicism and blind reaction to someone's excellence or fortune carry forward the fact of structured dogmas, archetypes, feudal approach as the main components in the construction of Indian social framework; hierarchical society always groomed to spurn and keep have-nots on the brink. In such social construction poor, orphan, exploited underdogs are never accepted owing to age-old cynicism. This has entailed ceaseless struggle and battle between such unaccepted individuals and cynical social forces which much often presents to tragic phenomena of individual succumbing to the ethnic powers. Nevertheless, Swarup in this novel has gone away from colonial style of typical tragic flaws by putting forward the idea of nirvana for the protagonist as the deterrence to antagonistic society.

The politics of Indians social system has been depicted have firmer grip on the individual and family units in recent twenty first century in *The White Tiger*. This novel hinges upon the getting success formula in materialistic modern India. Feudal system still prevails venomous like free hunting reptile in rural India, yet metros provide opportunities to the esoteric species like white tiger to rise above this jungle of materialism. After murdering his good Ashok, his good employer, Balram emerges to be a successful entrepreneur in Balgalore. He is a wanted fugitive murderer whose sketch image is displayed everywhere. But nobody suspects his to be absconding sensing his status and money power. Public in general including police is too cynical about the domestic servant-cum-drivers to believe their rise to the status of entrepreneurship as they are supposed to within the peripheries of rooster coop. The police officer is as engrossed with Balram's influence as entrepreneur Ashok Sharma that he refuses to recognize him at all:

He counted the money—ten thousand rupees—heard what I wanted, and asked for double. I gave him a bit more, and he was happy. I tell you, Mr. Premier, my poster was right there, the one I had seen earlier, the whole time I was negotiating with him. The WANTED poster, with the dirty little photo of me.¹⁵

Thus, true facets of social and economic life have been mirrored in the selected novels in the form of prevalent neo-feudalism, ongoing cycle of class struggle, misery of have-nots in the social construct hinging upon strong hierarchical caste system, deep rooted corruption, social norms and codes, obstinate patriarchy, archetypes, stereotypes; man-made cultural, communal, emotional, regional barriers, etc. While human predicaments,

deep sense of snobbery for the West and continuing sense of Raj hangover, structured cynicism based upon age-old feudal practices find ample echo in the form of psychological barriers in these novels.

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