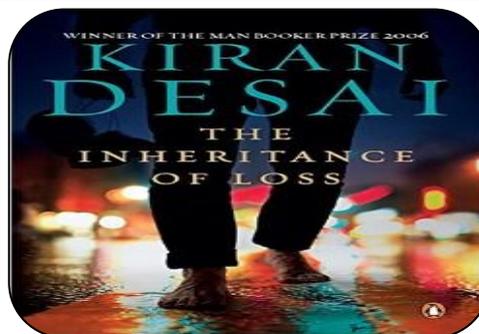




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## A RE-ORIENTALIST IMAGE OF NEW AND EXOTIC DARK INDIA: KIRAN DESAI'S *THE INHERITANCE OF LOSS* AND ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER*

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper examines Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss and Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger – novels that are fierce and shockingly effective. They make a counterblast to the language that boasts that "India is shining." The paper further probes into the categorization of the novels as "imaginative geographies" of the orientalist thought developed and structured on the theoretical rift amongst the "first and third worlds". It tries to investigate the references of exoticness mentioned and compounded with the knowledge of India as a developing economy, is sure to lead the readers on a quest for an exotic tales set in a globalized world. Moreover, it looks into the way the author tries to deconstruct the widely disseminated exotic images of India as a land of spiritual bliss and also the Exotic Dark India.*

**KEYWORDS :** Orientalism, Image, Post-colonialism, cultural spaces.

### INTRODUCTION

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, through the description of Balram's village, paints a picture of an Orient that is at once exotic and repulsive. He borrows Conrad's image of Darkness (also used by Roy in *The God of Small Things*) to describe Balram's native place (*The White* 14). One can easily read Adiga's use of Oriental tropes of darkness and animality as a clever attempt to win the interest of Western readers. However, it is to be noted that Adiga does not create a text in the Orientalist fashion that neatly constructs a binary between the East and the West and constitutes the Oriental as the "Other". Characters like Mr Ashok or Pinky Madam are not likely to be seen as the "Other" by the reader, although they are Indians.

India in Adiga's novel is not all darkness; there is an "India of Light" (14) too. The "India of Light" is formed by states that have progressed rapidly, thanks to the IT revolution. These states owe their prosperity to Western companies that have set up businesses in the states or have outsourced their work to companies in these states. Other states in India, like Balram's village, that are untouched by the benevolent hands of the West, remain in the dark. On account of his humble origins and lack of education, Balram is not able to partake of the benefits of globalization in India. Balram, the protagonist, thus fits into the mould of the "Other" by virtue of his origin and nature. In the imperial period, the Oriental was constituted as the "Other" to represent an image that was the antithesis of what the colonialists stood for. Now, in the era of globalization, power and prosperity are closely aligned with one's inclusion in the globalized world, and ones excluded from it end up being the "Other".

### A Re-Orientalist Image

The “Other” which occupies a marginal position in the global network is ironically central to Desai and Adiga’s work. Both Desai and Adiga’s work feature a domestic servant —the cook in *The Inheritance of Loss* and Balram Halwai in *The White Tiger*. The domestic space is considered to be a feminine space and the writers by situating their characters within this space have created male servants whose masculinity comes under constant questioning because of the nature of their work and societal expectations surrounding it.

In doing so, Desai and Adiga play on the patterns set by Oriental discourses that sought to feminize the colonized. The feminization of the indigenous inside the colonial realm itself was the antithesis of the masculinization of Britishness; this phrase refers to the attribution of 'women-like' features to women in the context of the lesser importance put on feminine gender identity. As a result, whether in Asia or other regions of the colonised world, a strikingly uniform discourse on the native's innate "effeminacy"—his lack of ability for self-government and reasoned decision-making—emerged (Srivastava 7).

In the works of Adiga and Desai, the feminization of the male servant can be said to begin at the stage of his entry into employment. The cook makes his way to the judge’s house on the basis of false recommendations that his father had somehow obtained for him. Balram also seeks the help of a Nepali security in the household for a word of recommendation to become Mr Ashok’s driver. Radhika Chopra points out that workers will seldom be able to stroll in off the street to acquire a job since domestic space is not available. An individual worker must have their personality "vouched for" by others in order to obtain employment. The two main characteristics that render young men employable as home workers are reputation and dependability. Similar to the veiled lady, a young male worker's sense of self is fleshed out by those who stand there for him, just as a woman may only be addressed via others who symbolically stand before her (31). The nature of duties that the society expects servants to perform in their respective households is also significant.

Although Balram in *The White Tiger* was designated as the driver and the chef in *The Inheritance of Loss* had been hired largely to cook, their responsibilities in the home were not limited to either one. The cook took care of every domestic task, purchased supplies, looked after Sai, and even ironed the judge's clothing, even his pants. In addition to driving the automobile, Balram was also required to prepare meals in the kitchen and maintain the house. He also had an obligation to give his master a foot massage or play cricket with the family's kids and let them win. The affluent in India, or at least in the Darkness, do not have chauffeurs, cooks, barbers, or tailors, as Balram correctly notes. Simply put, they have servants.

Subsequently, it may be noticed that by running additional domestic tasks, the cook and the driver in the respective novels are filling the feminine roles of a woman who manages the kitchen, looks after the kids, and keeps the house clean and organised. The servants are called by an electric bell, according to Balram, who writes: “When our masters wanted us, an electric bell began to ring throughout the quarters — we would rush to a board and find a red light flashing next to the number of the apartment whose servant was needed upstairs” (*The White* 130).

In Desai's novel, the chef is almost always present at the judge's home, but she is constantly in the background, waiting for the judge to give her instructions. His name is not even mentioned in the book till the very last page. Chopra compares the parda system, which orthodox households required their female members to follow, to the practise of servants ringing the bell and avoiding being called by name. When the society in the form of the employer shows a servant his place, he has no choice but to stay in it. The servant on his part thus willingly fits himself into a feminine mould (34).

As a consequence, the reader finds that Balram frequently exhibits this type of body language. When commanded to sit, he frequently sits on the ground in front of his master. Balram avoids staring at the image of the Storks' pet dogs Cuddles and Puddles when he first sees it at Ashok's flat because he couldn't bear to see them even in a picture. He never looked away from the carpet, which had the added advantage of giving him the appearance of a pucca servant (*The White* 129). In Desai's book, Sai

frequently converses with the chef. However, he rarely speaks to the judge unless it is imperative to convey a crucial message. He collapses at the judge's feet, clasping one of them, and begs for forgiveness after failing to locate the judge's missing dog (*The Inheritance* 352).

It is significant to note that both the cook and Balram Halwai meekly submit to being used as scapegoats by their employers. The judge orders the cook to attend the GNLF march, when the insurgents demand compulsory attendance from every house. The cook reluctantly follows his master's orders and finds himself in a riot. Balram submissively signs a confession when the Mongoose begs him to accept responsibility for Pinky Madam's crime of inadvertently murdering a kid. A word of protest against such demands would have been a masculine act of courage. However, both these men, being dependent on their employers for their survival, have no choice but to remain silent, submissive and servile to their masters. Not only the body language of the servants, even the thought processes of the male servants reveal a deliberate attempt to suppress their masculinity and an unconscious attempt to display their femininity.

In *The White Tiger*, the reader finds that Balram constantly feels guilty about being sexually aroused by the presence of Pinky, Mr Ashok's wife. He reasons that "master and mistress are like father and mother to you, so how can you get excited by the mistress?" (*The White* 143). It is normal for servants to refer to their employers' as father and mother. Balram, by adopting this line of thinking, clearly bars his mind from desiring his master's wife as it amounted to incest. When Pinky leaves Mr Ashok for good, Balram tells himself: "Now that she was gone, it was my duty to be like a wife to him. I had to make sure he ate well, and slept well, and did not get thin" (184). Balram later steps into the role of a mother, narrating stories and singing songs in order to make Mr Ashok feel better. Balram looks after Mr Ashok as if he were a baby: "Baby, I thought, rubbing his back as he heaved and threw up one more time, you big, pathetic baby. I put my hand out and wiped the vomit from his lips and cooed soothing words to him" (187).

It is also discovered that the chef in *The Inheritance of Loss* adopts a mother mentality. Sai moans when he arrives late at home, seeming round and feminine. As a result, Qayum and Ray are correct to claim that male slaves are failed patriarchs, and their entire manhood is called into doubt. Male servants are unsuccessful patriarchs because of the degrading domestic—read: feminine—tasks they must carry out and the attributes that make them good servants (Qayum and Ray 117). Despite this, many men still work as slaves since doing so allows them to better perform their obligations to their families (122).

Meanwhile, in Desai's tale, the chef is sustained by this optimism. The chef was a helpless guy who had struggled to learn to read and write, had laboured nonstop his entire life, and had only survived to see his son (*The Inheritance* 12). Similar sentiments may be heard in Balram's statement to the Chinese Premier that "the Indian family is the reason we are trapped and tied to the coop (*The White* 176). It is significant to note that both the cook and Balram Halwai attempt to regain their sense of masculinity by entering the global network. Carla Freeman has argued that the discourse of globalization itself is a gendered one based on powerful, dichotomous model in which the global is masculine and the local is feminine. (108) The cook in Desai's novel attempts to find a place for himself in the masculine global world through his son Biju.

To reiterate, according to Chopra, a servant's biography cannot be understood in the context of one lifetime. It looks forward to the next generation, to which it is inextricably connected. The final recovery and restoration of a servant's manhood occurs in that second life-like reorientation (35). The cook pins all his hopes on his son Biju, who had become "the luckiest man in the whole wide world" by winning for himself a tourist visa to the U.S. (*The Inheritance* 205). Mobility across borders is never an issue of concern for the educated elite. Lola is one of the Westernized Indian characters in Desai's novel.

The narrative tells us that her daughter Pixie worked as a BBC reporter in England and Lola visited England now and then and came back with suitcases stuffed with Knorr soup packets, After Eights, Boots cucumber lotion and Marks and Spencer underwear. Biju was not one of those "preselected, numerically restricted, perfect-for-foreign travel group, skilled in the use of knife and

fork" (203) who could by their manner, dress and accent secure a visa easily and it is his good luck that gets him a visa to travel to America.

Desai's cook dreams of global inclusion through possession and consumption of objects that signify modernity. The cook had done this out of yearning for modernity, both for Biju and for himself (62). However, Biju's life in New York as an illegal immigrant on an expired tourist visa was anything but easy. Burdened by his father's expectations, he clung on to this sordid life, eternally yearning for the elusive green card (108). The green card authenticates one's formal and legal inclusion in America.

It signifies not just physical mobility across borders, but also a financial mobility in the upward direction. The green card status holds the key to unlocking goods signifying global modernity that the cook dreams of at night. But Biju can only watch legal foreigners with envy as they went shopping for the magical, expanding third-world accordion-pleated bags at inexpensive luggage shops. The bags were packed with pockets and zippers to unhook more nooks, and the entire structure unfolded into a huge area that could hold enough to set up a complete existence in another nation.

By the same token, Biju's position is that of an undesired "Other" in America. Moreover, Biju's employer is found to have expected men from the less affluent regions of Europe. Perhaps they might have commonalities with them, such as religion and race, but they weren't arriving in sufficient numbers or with sufficient fervour (54). Biju's position is comparable to, if not worse than, his own father's marginal and emasculated status at home. He is exploited by his employer and denied medical care when he meets with an accident in the kitchen.

Biju finds himself in a cross-cultural dilemma as he takes up job in a restaurant that serves beef and sees Indians eating it. Biju cannot digest this. He cannot make himself at home in America like his employer Harish-Harry who could strike a balance between two cultures by assuming a hyphenated identity. Only remembering how much money he was making helped Harish-Harry to relax. He discovered a morality that everyone could agree with, a perfectly good cause for being here, and a way to bridge the gap inside this concept (166).

However, this logic did not hold for Biju, for he was not getting paid much. Biju also cannot be like Saeed Saeed, another fellow undocumented worker from Zanzibar who marries an American woman just to get a green card and thereby forges a successful connection with America. In the middle of rioting, Biju returns to his own nation and father, only to have his belongings—including his clothes—raped from him. He receives a woman's garment from the rioters to cover up his humiliation. Biju's homecoming in a woman's robe represents his return to a world of slavery and poverty, where it is unlikely that he will be able to keep his manhood. Biju's return to India also reinforces his position as an "Other" that is at odds with the workings of the global world.

Balram in Adiga's novel also attempts to find a place for himself in the global world like the cook. However, unlike the cook, he does not look up to his descendants to do so. Instead, Balram takes it upon himself to do so. His first step in entering the global circuit is by means of mimicry of hegemonic masculinity as embodied by his employer Mr Ashok. He buys a white T-shirt and a pair of shoes, dresses in them and drives into a mall, a place he had always wanted to see from the inside. Balram's desire to enter the shopping mall can be said to be a significant turning point in the novel for it also signals his desire for inclusion in the neoliberal world.

The shopping mall and the call centre in the novel act as access points to one's inclusion in the neoliberal setup of Indian economy. The call centre and the shopping mall in Gurgaon bring with it neoliberal promises of opportunity, prosperity and consumption. It is the closest of America that one can get in India:

"Now, Mr. Ashok's thinking was smart. Ten years ago, they say, there was nothing in Gurgaon, just water buffaloes and fat Punjabi farmers. Today it's the modernest suburb of Delhi. American Express, Microsoft, all the big American companies have offices there. The main road is full of shopping malls—each mall has a cinema inside! So if Pinky Madam missed America, this was the best place to bring her." (*The White* 122)

Quite significantly, the shopping mall remains out of bounds for Balram and his friends. The narrative also never enters the site of the call centre. Balram can only look at it from outside and enquire about it (127).

According to Julia Broom, the call centre employee's closeness to and access to the mall are directly related to the call center's proximity to America via the phone line. This sentence implies that people who are permitted admittance into the mall are also given access to a fictitious "America" where they are free to buy and make their own decisions, which they can then bring with them to their homes and incorporate into their everyday lives (55). The fact that Balram has little knowledge of what a call centre is and that he can hardly muster the courage to spend time in the shopping mall clearly situates him as an outsider to the processes and practices of neo-liberalization.

In the same vein, the character, Balram also makes another attempt to enter the masculine space of globalism by trying to sleep with a foreign prostitute with golden hair, just like his employer Mr Ashok. Balram's desire to sleep with foreign women can be said to be fuelled by the erotic Murder Weekly magazines that he reads along with his fellow drivers. However, Balram's desire to take part in the cultures of consumerism brought in by globalization is not fulfilled. All he gets after hard bargaining is a prostitute with her hair dyed a fake golden colour. This is the closest that he can get to being like the masculine global elite that Mr Ashok represents.

Meanwhile, disillusioned and angry, Balram seeks an easy way out for global inclusion. He kills Mr Ashok, steals money and flees to Bangalore to start his own business there, assuming the name of Mr Ashok. At the conclusion of the story, Balram declares his wish to get married. He claims he would never admit that slitting his master's neck that evening in Delhi was a mistake. That he would affirm that it was all worthy to understand what it is like to not be a servant, even if just for a day or a moment. He believes he is prepared to become a parent (321).

This conclusion is very important because it is only when Balram leaves the humiliating life of a servant and becomes a prosperous and successful entrepreneur that he feels masculine enough to get married and have children. When Balram rejoices in his success as an entrepreneur, he thinks that he just wants to throw his hands up and holler, so loudly that his voice would carry over the phones in the call- center rooms all the way to the people in America. (320) Notable here is the fact that Balram even at this point can only forge an imaginative connection to the global by his remote association with the call- centre employees who are clients of his taxi service. The marginal thus continues to remain so despite efforts to enter the mainstream of global economy.

In comparison, Desai and Adiga create such "othered" characters and by claiming to give voice to them are perhaps unwittingly turning - marginality into a commodity available for metropolitan consumption. Furthermore, it would be appropriate to mention that Huggan is correct when he says that postcolonial studies has profited from its apparent marginality while helping to transform marginality itself into a desirable intellectual product. However, despite their open hostility, postcolonial writers and a few critics have built up kinds of cultural capital that have elevated them to recognized—and even celebrity—status figures (viii).

To further, support, it may be surmised that authors like Desai and Adiga, despite the best of their intentions, become producers of a Re-Orientalist representation of India that circulates images of a poor, backward nation for Western readers. According to Lau, literary tourism of poverty has been called cultural voyeurism or even poverty porn and accused of using poverty as a means of titillation in social realism books to appease the arrogant white world (Lau, 'Introducing Re-Orientalism' 16).

Subsequently, in the same vein, Barbara Corte also attributes the Western interest in such representations to the uneven nature of development brought in by globalization. Since poverty, as depicted in Desai and more significantly in Adiga is located in the East, Western readers find pleasure in consuming this poverty literature because it is comforting to read about poverty as belonging to some other place that is not theirs. Such representations situate the western fears of poverty in the East, thereby helping Western readers define themselves in terms of development and prosperity whereas the East continues to be the "Other", a place stagnant in terms of development and civilization. Moreover, Orsini, in a similar vein, argues that postcolonial Indian novels create a world in which "the

West can settle down to contemplate, not India, but its latest reinterpretation of itself" (Lau 17). Thus, in reading these novels, the Western readers are not just merely reading India, they are also constructing their own Western identities in a self-assuring manner.

Interestingly, the novels of Adiga and Desai carry an awareness of the readers' tastes and how the works will be received. Adiga is acutely aware of the currency of Eastern images in the West and uses them in his text quite explicitly and liberally not only to capture the reader's attention by giving them what they desire, but also to critique the manner in which these images are enthusiastically lapped up by the readers, blissfully believing them to be true. One of the ways in which Adiga achieves this end is through the use of a hostile and unreliable narrator. The Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao actually visited Delhi in 2005 to resolve the longstanding border dispute between India and China.

However, Adiga's protagonist Balram states that the Chinese Premier was in India to discover the "truth" about Indian entrepreneurship. Adiga's Balram tells his story in the background of an actual historical visit, but by giving an absurdly false reason as the aim of the visit, calls into question not just his reliability as a narrator, but also the authenticity of all those discourses that claim to tell the truth about India. The fact that Balram is able to twist the Chinese Premier's tale to suit his interests also suggests how discourses about the Orient may have been written to suit the interests of the imperialists.

It is interesting to note that Balram's knowledge of China is derived from his reading of "Exciting Tales of the Exotic East", a book that he had bought from a second-hand book market in Delhi. The fact that Balram's knowledge of China was solely based on this book with a clichéd title parallel and critiques a similar process of the West acquiring knowledge about the East from books with stereotyped images.

As Lau correctly points out, the unreliable narrator could be devolving the re-Orientalism process by partially pulling the rug out from under the reader and insisting that there can never be just one true version of events while simultaneously casting doubt on the very idea of authenticity due to the unreliability of the narrators. He continues by stating that the unreliable narrator even calls into question the veracity of the structure of the entire publishing industry, its influential gatekeepers, its reader access, and its marketing, underscoring the need for constant questioning and critique of knowledge, knowledge construction, validation, distribution and authority (29-30). Adiga's choice of the Chinese Premier as the recipient of Balram's letter is also notable, for Adiga chooses to make Balram tell his story to someone from the East and not to the West.

Considering the fact that globalization has ushered in a change in the power equation and power today is not vested solely with the West. The East-West binary has collapsed and given way to a new binary of the powerful and the disempowered. The language and tone that Balram employs to address the Chinese Premier, an authority of power in the globalized world is highly significant. Although, Balram addresses the Chinese Premier as "Your Excellency" (*The White* 4), "Sir" and "Mr Premier" (3) in his letters, his reverence borders on mockery as he casually tells his life-story to the Premier using vulgar language: "I guess, Your Excellency, that I too should start off by kissing some god's arse" (8). He even adopts a highly disrespectful and racist tone when he says: "That's not to say I don't respect them, Mr Premier! Don't ever let that blasphemous idea into your yellow skull" (8). One should note the fact that Balram confesses that he does not speak English (3) nor does the Chinese Premier and yet, the letters that form the novel are written in English.

Although the Chinese Premier is the addressee of the letters, he is not its actual reader. There is an implicit metropolitan reader that the text foresees and it is this reader and his quest for an exotic and dark India that Adiga mocks at using an unsettling language. Adiga serves up what the western taste seems to seek to a surfeit which will purposefully and unwholesomely over-satiate, giving the Western readers what they want in a tone that is both ridiculing and self-mocking (Mendes and Lau 3). Adiga's recourse to Re-Orientalism can be seen as a conscious and strategic one that has a subversive end.

Furthermore, Desai's employment of Re-Orientalism in her work stems from her identity as a diasporic writer. As a diasporic writer, her identity is a fractured one: "Shaken about the globe, we live

out our fractured lives. Enticed or fleeing, we re-form ourselves, taking on partially the coloration of our new backgrounds. Even our tongues are alienated and rejoined – a multiplicity that creates richness and confusion” (Seth 403). Quite significantly, Desai seems to possess the awareness that as a diasporic writer, the authenticity of her writing will stand questioned in India. This awareness finds reflection in her depiction of the reading habits of Lola and Noni. The sisters read works by both English and Indian authors, although they like authors who focus on the places they have lived in. They disliked English writers who wrote about India since the accounts didn't reflect reality. What was lovely was English writers writing about England (Desai, *The Inheritance* 217).

With regard to V.S. Naipaul, Loli believes that he has “colonial neurosis” and Noni wonders, “After all, why isn't he writing of where he lives now? Why isn't he taking up, say, race riots in Manchester?” (52). Lola and Noni can be viewed as representatives of Desai's Indian readers who are on a quest for authentic representations of cultures and who believe that diasporic writers cannot write authentically about India. It can be argued that Desai anticipates such allegations from her readers and tries to avoid them by telling her story in fragments. Desai has pointed out how her novel is made up “of half-stories, or quarter-stories” (Allington 135) and not complete ones because as a diasporic writer she is not in a position to provide complete ones.

However, Desai cannot steer clear of the anxiety to sound as authentic as she can and therefore goes on to frequently use italicized Hindi words and Hindi songs in the text. However, such an attempt only leads to more distortion as Desai's text does not contain many Nepali or Gujarati words even though the novel's central characters are from the said community. Lau, in her discussion of the works of South Asian diasporic women writers has rightly pointed out that there is an overemphasis on being South Asian in such works (Lau 582). Therefore, one can see that Desai's Re-Orientalism is not a strategic one like Adiga's, but can be said to originate in her anxiety to sound as authentic as possible.

## CONCLUSION

An interesting parallel can be found between Desai and the Indian students briefly mentioned in her work. The Indian students in America would come with their white girlfriends and order hot Indian food “invariably, showing off, informing their date they were unadulterated exotic product” (Desai, *The Inheritance* 164), but would start whimpering for yoghurt after biting into the hot vindaloo. Desai also seems to be doing just that, perhaps, unconsciously, as she tries to come off to her readers as an authentic writer from India, using a mix of English and Hindi to portray Indians in stereotyped images by situating them within conditions of poverty, hostility and failure.

However, as a diasporic writer, she is out of touch with the reality of Indian experience and therefore cannot connect with it in a deep or positive way, just as the student characters in her novel who can only claim a shallow connection to Indian food by means of ancestry, but cannot relish spicy Indian food. The issue of Re-orientalism inevitably brings to the forefront questions of authenticity that have plagued all the works under consideration.

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