



RESEARCH ARTICLE

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2 3 4 9 - 9 4 5 1

Vol.2.Issue.1.,2015

ISSUE OF IDENTITY IN ARAVIND ADIGA'S *THE WHITE TIGER* &
FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY'S *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*

Dr. D. R. PRATIMA ROY

St. Joseph's Jr. & Degree College for Women
Atmakur Road, KURNOOL-2(AP)



Dr. D. R. PRATIMA ROY

ABSTRACT

This paper is a contribution to the perennial debate on the issue of 'identity', in the light of the above mentioned novels. There is a striking similarity in them; the protagonists are obsessed by a (destructive) drive. This paper addresses how the phenomenology of identity is presented through the function of desire and how the lives of these protagonists in their post-murder phase elucidate the ethical questions.

Both the novels go in line with the latest cognitive and behavioural science, which conclude that human beings are deeply irrational creatures who use reason, not to guide their actions, but to justify them after they perform an act. An established principle in most modernist works is that the more closely the human character is examined, the more ambiguous and ungrounded in some final essence the human character seems to become; the protagonists – Balram Halwai and Rodon Romanovich Raskolnikov – fit into this grove of complexity.

This paper compares how their respective behavioural tendencies/attitudes affect the question of identity. My argument includes not only how the literary representation of Dostoevsky differs from Anand Adiga, but also how a 19th century Russian context differs from that of post-modern Indian milieu.

Article Info:

Article Received:19/02/2015

Revised on: 04/03/2015

Accepted on: 07/03/2015

©COPY RIGHT 'KY PUBLICATIONS'

The debut novel of the 40th Man Booker Prize awardee, the Madras-born Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, has its eponymous White Tiger – the protagonist - Balram Halwai, narrating the truth about India to the Premier of China, Wen Jiabao, on the occasion of his forthcoming visit to India. The novel takes the form of seven letters to His Excellency, Jiabao, by Balram Halwai, as he heard on All India Radio about Mr. Jiabao's wish to meet successful entrepreneurs at Bangalore; and he was one such.

Balram introduces himself to the Premier as a "self-taught entrepreneur", the story of whose upbringing is "the story of how a half-baked fellow is produced". He confesses that he is not an original thinker but that he is an original listener. He came from the rural uneducated, exploited and poverty-stricken family and landed into Gurgaon's industrialist's family as a chauffeur. This is one of the landlords of Laxmangarh, who

got settled in Gurgaon and it's the same family which is responsible for halting his school studies. His consuming ambition to escape from his little village of Laxmangarh to New Delhi is fulfilled.

In his village he was first called as *Munna*, which means 'boy'. Later when his father joined him in the school, Munna was not accepted by his teacher. Munna told him that none in his family have time to name him. So he was given the name *Balram*, by his school teacher. It was on this manner, in Balram's words:

He (the teacher) passed his hand through his hair and said, 'We'll call you Ram. Wait – don't we have a Ram in this class? I don't want any confusion. It'll be Balram. You know who Balram was, don't you?'

'No, sir.'

'He was the sidekick of god Krishna. Know what my name is?'

'No, sir.'

He laughed. 'Krishna' (pp.13-14)

Balram remained true to his name by being sincere student to his teacher, who complemented Balram before the School Inspector as the *smartest of the lot* (P.54).

When the Inspector visited the school, he pointed out Balram's unique nature in learning his lessons well:

The inspector pointed his cane straight at me. 'You, young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals – the creature that comes only once in a generation?'

I thought about it and said:

'The white tiger.'

'That's what you are in **this** jungle.' (P.55)

Balram was praised as 'The White Tiger' by the school inspector in front of all in the school, promised a scholarship and given a book as a gift. But the paradox of life is that *good news becomes bad news – and soon* (P.56). This 'young, intelligent and vivacious fellow' could not keep up his honesty in the long run, though he gained confidence from his employer, Mr. Ashok. He kept his distinctiveness as the white tiger till the end of the novel, by being an individual with rare tenacity.

With his bitter experiences in Laxmangarh, he has learnt many a lesson. After settling to work as chauffeur in a big city, he had started to observe and learn more of its ways. As a first step in climbing the ladder of life, he victimized his senior chauffeur Ram Singh and became the driver of the more privileged Honda City car. From then on, he started to drive his master Ashok and his American wife, Pinky, to expensive malls, shopping complexes and hotels. He became acquainted with many drivers, but kept himself away from their entertainments. He did not have any identity with them, though they provoked him.

Balram identifies with his master, Ashok and he's really fortunate to have a boss like that. When he is forced to take his responsibility for an accident committed by Pinky madam, he begins to mistrust them and doubts the loyalty of his master. He thinks of ways to get money whenever he is driving his masters to the politicians, with the car loaded with bags of money. This temptation of getting away with money, by murdering the owner was a seed sown in his mind. Thus there are early signs for the act of murder on his master Mr. Ashok. First he can't overcome his thoughts to murder his good-natured master but at the end, it's a cold blooded and well planned deed.

Balram admitted that he had committed murder. But this identity was justified by himself. If he had left Ashok strangled and gone, the latter would possibly recover, break out of his gag and call the police. The second reason that Balram said was that Ashok's family was 'going to do such terrible things to' Balram's family and that he 'was just getting (his) revenge in advance'.

Balram starts his decent life at Bangalore as an Entrepreneur. He takes his name as Ashok Sharma, and signs to the Premier in the letter as *Ashok Sharma, The White Tiger of Bangalore*. He became a successful entrepreneur, but is not sure how long this identity lasts. He writes to the Premier:

... I'll get bored of it sooner or later. I'm a first-gear man, Mr. Premier. In the end, I'll have to sell this start-up to some other moron – entrepreneur, I mean – and head into a new line. I'm thinking of real estate next. You see, I'm always a man who sees 'tomorrow' when others see 'today' (P.319).

Finally Balram is identified as just a man – resembling like any other man. After murder is done, he flees to Bangalore. Wall posters, displaying his face are seen at the rail stations. One illiterate man showed that poster and asked what the person in the poster did. Balram thought he was being watched and that the illiterate man found him out. But suddenly he asked:

You know who the fellow in the poster looks like?’

‘Who?’ I asked.

He grinned.

‘Me’

I looked at his face and the photo.

‘It’s true’, I said, slapping him on the back.

I told you: it could be the face of half the men of India. (P.295)

This speaks of the universal self that Balram identifies in him.

Fyodor Dostoevsky published his *Crime and Punishment* in 1866, with the grim life of Siberia (after the death sentence was commuted, Dostoevsky was deported to Siberia for hard labour) behind him. The novel presents a double conflict in its plot - an external and an internal: one conflict is between the estranged individual and his hostile universe, and the other is a clash between an isolated soul and his ethical or aesthetic consciousness. Since the plot is a double conflict, the first general problem is to understand the protagonist, Rodion Romanovich Raskolnikov's dual personality.

There are several ways of seeing this. In its broadest view, Raskolnikov fluctuates between the ideas of complete self-will and power, and extreme meekness and self-submissiveness. Raskolnikov, an impoverished student living in the St. Petersburg of the tsars, is determined to overreach his humanity and assert his untrammelled individual will. When he commits an act of murder and theft, he sets into motion a story that, for its excruciating suspense, its atmospheric vividness, and its depth of characterization and vision is almost unequalled in the literatures of the world.

Most of the story is presented from the viewpoint of Raskolnikov. Raskolnikov is an impoverished but proud, sensitive young intellectual, studying in Petersburg. He lives in a wretched garret, which is not much bigger than a cupboard. *His garret was under the roof of a high, five-storied house and was more like a cupboard than a room* (P.2).

He feels that its small size and low ceiling have been cramping both his mind and soul. It is the same way that Balram felt when he was housed in the cellar room of the owner’s glass house, where his companions were mosquitoes and other flies. Poverty had cut their wings of intellectual imagination, and their environment had a negative effect on them.

The word ‘raskol’ in Russian means ‘split’. The name identifies Raskolnikov as a man with split personality. Like ‘Munna’, Raskolnikov also is lovingly called as Rodya, by his sister Dounia and mother Pulcharia, as Rodion by his friend Razumihin. He has love towards his mother and sibling. He refuses to allow Dunya to marry Luzhin and then a moment later tells her to marry whom she pleases, this reversal is an example of the humane side not wanting his sister to sacrifice herself to help him. He doesn’t want his mother to know about the punishment he is meted out with, after the crime.

Raskolnikov is best seen as two characters. He sometimes acts in one manner and then suddenly in a manner completely contradictory. These actions compel one to view him as having a split personality or as being a dual character. Perhaps the best description of Raskolnikov occurs in Part Three, Chapter 2 when Razumihkin tries to explain to Raskolnikov's mother, Pulcheria Alexandrovna, and to his sister, Dunya (Avdotya Romanovna) about Raskolnikov’s behaviour of late:

He is morose, gloomy, proud and haughty, and of late — and perhaps for a long time before — he has been suspicious and fanciful. He has a noble nature and a kind heart; he does not like showing his feelings and would rather do a cruel thing than open his heart freely. . .It's as though he were alternating between two characters.(P.144)

These two characters are best represented as his cold, intellectual detached side, which emphasizes power and self-will, and his warm, humane compassionate side, which suggests self-submissiveness and meekness.

The intellectual side is a result of his deliberate and premeditated actions; that is, when he is functioning on this side, he never acts spontaneously, but instead, every action is premeditated. It is this aspect of his personality that enables him to formulate his theories about crime and to commit the crime. This is the same premeditated, cold and intellectual detached act that arose in Balram's mind, which made him commit crime.

One common identity that both Balram and Raskolnikov have is that they want to be rarest of the rare personalities. While Balram wants himself to be projected as a white tiger, Raskolnikov wants to be a Napoleon. He tells Sonya (the Marmaleodov daughter, who turns out as a prostitute to save the family from starving) about his attempts to become a superman like Napoleon. He is very conscious of his motive, and sets a high price on his act. He has been equipped with all possible props: besides his own intellectual theorizing, he reinforces through the actual experiences the necessity of relieving the suffering humanity by doing a deed that he thinks would bring amelioration. So, he murders a pawn-broker, Alyona Ivanovna, with an axe he stole from a janitor's woodshed, with the intention of using her money for good causes, based on a theory he had developed of the "great man". He also kills her meek-tempered half-sister (Lizaveta Ivanovna) who arrives and stumbles across the body.

The Marmaleodovs, his mother and sister, and even his nightmare of seeing a man being beaten, is a picture of his 'conscious' mind 'imagining' the downtrodden humanity. He tells to Sonya that he wanted to be a Napoleon and that is the reason he murdered the pawn-broker. The tragedy is that he does not hold himself to the end, and does not stand by the props. The vision has faded his mind. He pitifully realizes that he is not fit to be a 'ruler' of the society, and that he cannot be a Napoleon; to be one such requires a heart of sterner stuff.

Raskolnikov's intellectual side is intricately bound up in his theory of the extraordinary man. If Raskolnikov is to be one of the extraordinary, he must be able to stand alone, without needing human companionship or without being influenced by the actions of others. He must rely on no one and must be completely self-sufficient. He is wishing for Sonya's company and looking forward to the future after the seven more years of punishment at Siberia.

Raskolnikov wishes to have a resurrected identity:

Under his pillow lay the New Testament. He took it up mechanically. The book belonged to Sonia; it was the one from which she had read the raising of Lazarus to him... He had asked her for it himself not long before his illness and she brought him the book without a word...

...one thought passed through his mind: "Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations at least..." (P.368)

Dostoevsky concludes the novel with these optimistic lines:

He did not know that the new life would not be given him for nothing, that he would have to pay dearly for it, that it would cost him great striving, great suffering.

But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life. That might be the subject of a new story, but our present story is ended (P.368).

The notion of the white tiger is parallel to that of Napoleon, however, with a difference. While Balram is never doubtful of his character being akin to that of a white tiger, Raskolnikov is weighed with the guilt of murder and recoils from the idea of becoming a Napoleon – a superman. Nevertheless, he is a Napoleon with a ready mind to brave the world fearlessly by taking Sonya, as his bride.

Dostoevsky exposes the reader to a full study of the split personality. Raskolnikov's dual personality is the controlling idea behind the murder and behind his punishment. Raskolnikov is used as a representative of the modern young Russian intellectual whose fate is intricately bound up in the fate of Russia herself. Therefore, the story is a parable of the fate of a nihilistic and skeptical youth in nineteenth century Russia, a position once held by Dostoevsky himself. He later rejected the revolutionary opinions and came to hate and fear them. Dostoevsky's drama of sin, guilt, and redemption transforms the sordid story of an old woman's murder into the nineteenth century's profoundest and compelling philosophical novel.

Both the protagonists believe that there are two divisions between the people: to Balram, people with big bellies and people with small bellies; and to Raskolnikov, the ordinary and the extraordinary. The ordinary are the common rabble of the society but the extraordinary are beyond the application of moral codes. They are notably like Napoleon, or the white tiger, and would not need to think twice about their actions. Raskolnikov believes himself to be one of these extraordinary men and is thus "allowed" to commit murder.

The malady of both lives lie in that the fact of the murders themselves do not particularly torment them; what torments them is the fact that they have not "transgressed", and that they was not able to be the "great man" each has had theorized about. Both confess their crime, but not with remorse. Balram writes to the Chinese Premier while Raskolnikov confesses to the destitute and prostitute Sonia Semyonovna Marmeladova, who guides him towards admitting to the crime, and he confesses to Ilya Petrovich, a police lieutenant with an explosive temper. Raskolnikov is sentenced to exile in Siberia, he begins his mental and spiritual rehabilitation. *The White Tiger* is an open-ended novel and the conclusion of Balram's confession is left to the readers.

Crime and Punishment was to be a vision of the ultimate error and moral sufferings of those who had so cut themselves off from established authority and morality that they lost all respect for human life. Therefore, the life and aims of Raskolnikov became in some ways the fate of the young Russian intellectuals, in much the same way as the life and aims of Balram in *The White Tiger* are in many ways similar to the present day Indian young, who are, in the words of Aravind Adiga,

The new generation, ..., is growing up with no morals at all (P.316).

REFERENCES

1. Adiga, Aravind, *The White Tiger*, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2008. Print
2. Dostoevsky, Fyodor M, *Crime and Punishment*, London: Penguin, 2002. Print.
3. Frank, Joseph, *Dostoevsky: The Years of Ordeal*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. Print.
4. Loomba, Ania, *Colonialism Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 1998. Print
5. Rahv, Philip, "Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment*," in *Dostoevsky: A Collection of Essays*, Ed., René Wellek, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. Print.
6. Tang, Chenxi, *The Geographic Imagination of Modernity: Geography, Literature, and Philosophy in German Romanticism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. Print.
7. *The Secret of the White Tiger*, National Geographic, 304(2000): pp.26-27.
8. Waller, Kathleen, Redefinitions of India and Individuality in Adiga's *The White Tiger*, CLC Web: 14.2 (2012) Thematic Issue, *New Work in Comparative Indian Literatures and Cultures*, Ed., Mohan G. Ramanan & Tutun Mukherjee, Purdue University Press.