

Turmoil within and without: Modes of Human Resistance in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Rukhsana Ahmad's "Appearances"

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Abstract – ‘Stories of rottenness and corruption are always the best stories, aren’t they?’ Traditionally depicting a system or a figure the reader can object to, these stories offer readers the opportunity to identify with the undermined victim, and to applaud their resistances to oppression. Narratives of such kinds seemingly require acts of defiance from the characters, paving the way for their resistance against the abuse of power. In *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina defines ‘resisting’ as ‘contending with, and not exclusively or fundamentally as contending against’ structures of power. He presents it not merely as a reflexive response to subjugation, but one that is also deeply emotional, embedded in the nuances of choice and the lack of it. This essay analyses how Rukhsana Ahmad’s short story, “Appearances”, and Aravind Adiga’s novel *The White Tiger* – two works that tackle the complex realm of servitude in the South Asian diaspora – explore the more familiar notion of resistance as one of contending *against* a structure of power, yet also interrogate Medina’s idea of resistance as a way of contending *with* one’s situation. Notions of inequality, social expectations, and the awareness of personal worth are explored as tools that characterise a specific culture of servitude in these works, as well as the abuse of power on domestic and macrocosmic scales.

Keywords: resistance, abuse of power, South Asian diaspora, culture of servitude, domestic inequality

Introduction

‘Stories of rottenness and corruption are always the best stories, aren’t they’?¹ Traditionally depicting a system or a figure the reader can object to, these stories offer readers the opportunity to identify with the undermined victim and to applaud their resistances to oppression. Narratives of such kinds seemingly require acts of defiance from the characters, paving the way for their resistance against the abuse of power. In Rukhsana Ahmad’s short story, ‘Appearances’², and Aravind Adiga’s novel, *The White Tiger* – two works that tackle the complex realm of servitude in the South Asian diaspora – the concept of resistance is one that morphs and shifts, eluding any proper definition or representation.

The White Tiger is written in the form of a letter by its protagonist, Balram Halwai, to the visiting Chinese official, Premier Wen Jiabao. In acerbic detail, Balram recounts the history of his life as a self-made entrepreneur, depicting his rise from sweet-maker in the rural village of Laxmangarh, his formative interlude as a chauffeur in Delhi, and his current position as a businessman in Bangalore. Ahmad’s story “Appearances” is subtler in tone. Its plot about a disenchanting chauffeur, Safdar Khan, and his struggle to leave his implicitly exploitative job, unfolds in only 17 pages. Reading Ahmad’s understated short story alongside Adiga’s incendiary novel makes for not only an enjoyable reading experience, but also a valuable literary comparison, the texts’ formal and tonal differences emphasising their thematic similarities. Whether wryly or sympathetically, both works depict the insidious interplay of domestic servitude and emotional manipulation in the contemporary South Asian diaspora with deftness and an alertness to cultural sensitivities. A comparative reading allows the texts’ differences to collude productively with one another: Ahmad’s pensiveness teasing out the compassionate nuances in Adiga’s excoriating prose, while the latter’s unremitting critique emphasises and engages with the flares of rebellion in Ahmad’s tale.

¹ Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. London, Atlantic Books, 2008: p. 50. All further references to the novel will be cited within the essay in brackets as (*TWT*) with the corresponding page number.

² Ahmad, Rukhsana. “Appearances.” *The Gatekeeper’s Wife and Other Stories*. Lahore, ILQA Publications, 2014. All further references will be cited as (*A*) with the corresponding page number.

It is significant to note that both *The White Tiger* and “Appearances” are written by anglophone writers, neither of whom live in South Asia. Although this is an important point to recognise, the discourse on anglophone writing is a complex one that deserves more space for discussion than can be afforded here. In relation to their broader academic contexts, Adiga and Ahmad have also chosen to interrogate the internal domestic realm rather than the external political sphere. While Barbara Harlow’s (1987) exemplary writings have focused on resistance literature from territories of profound political subjugation, these works of fiction centre around the social hierarchies within the orderly structures of the home. Elleke Boehmer (2013) has also written cogently on the external practice of postcolonial resistance; by contrast, this essay is a foray into the internal landscapes of Adiga and Ahmad’s oppressed subjects. Resistance in these two texts takes the form of psychological inward turns instead of outward action.

Complexifying resistance

In *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina defines ‘resisting’ as ‘contending with, and not exclusively or fundamentally as contending against’ structures of power. By his conceptualisation, resistance ‘should not be understood exclusively, or even primarily, in oppositional terms’ (Medina 14); it can be both a reflexive response to subjugation and a response that is deeply emotional, embedded in the nuances of choice and the lack of it. Resistance, he writes, ‘can feel more like being pulled in different directions from the inside, like being torn from within’ (16). The shapes resistance takes, therefore, are not only those of action. Outward acts of resistance deal with revolt and uprising, where subjects actively desert unfair structures of power. The subject of this essay, however, is resistance of the inward kind: the quieter and more complex resistance of finding ways to withstand unfair situations – small inward epiphanies that can lead to outward action. Seen in this light, resistance is also an act of resilience.

While Medina is writing about a real-life need for resistance in epistemic interactions, his ideas are wielded here to discuss the realm of fictional

representation. The questions he poses are still pertinent to these texts: ‘what are the responsibilities of a resistant subjectivity? And do all subjects have an *obligation to resist?*’ (16). The heroism of both Adiga and Ahmad’s protagonists, I would argue, is that they resist their structures of dominance without necessarily needing to. Balram Halwai is well-equipped to follow in his father’s footsteps as a sweet-maker instead of embarking upon the riskier task of being a social entrepreneur; Safdar Khan’s anger at his employer stems from their lack of respect for him rather than any physical maltreatment. The two heroes resist the psychological systemic exploitation of knowing one’s place in a caste- and servant-based society, simply by having higher aspirations for themselves.

And, just as victims of oppression are under no obligation to resist, literature, of course, is not obliged to be didactic. Yet the searing social critiques of unequal structures of dominance in these two texts make them into works that depict ameliorating alternatives to the societies they criticise, moral or otherwise. In her essay “The Language of Literature”, Arundhati Roy writes about the difficulty of characterising her authorial position as a writer of fiction and nonfiction, and her subsequent label as a ‘writer-activist’. ‘Implicit in this categorization,’ she notes, ‘was that the fiction was not political and the essays were not literary’ (78). Perhaps that ‘battle for suzerainty’ (79), as she puts it, between fact and fiction, the political and the creative, and the attempt to reconcile them, constitutes its own kind of resistance.

Both “Appearances” and *The White Tiger* explore the subtleties and smaller instances of resistance, as well as how they denote an internal struggle between loyalties (whether towards one’s employer, one’s family, or other actors), cultural expectations, and an awareness of personal worth. These challenges are complexified further by what Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum define as ‘the rhetoric of love’: a complex discourse ‘that encompasses employer claims of affection and familial relationships that bind servants and employers to each other’ (Ray and Qayum 537). In Ahmad and Adiga’s works, the rhetoric of love is that which hides the nature of exploitation under the insidious guise of familiarity and complicates the protagonists’ relation to the realities of their labour in a process of social interpellation. Through this discourse, the authors

illustrate the more familiar notion of resistance as one of challenging a structure of power externally; and yet, they also interrogate Medina's concept of resistance as a way of contending with one's situation rather than against it – internally, as well as outwardly.

The idea of internal resistance may be interpreted as a sign of resignation, even one of obliviousness. *The White Tiger's* protagonist, Balram Halwai, criticises this disposition as an unchangeable facet of Indian society in his 'Rooster Coop' metaphor (*TWT* 173). The roosters, a zoomorphism of the poor, 'see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel'. His ominous statement implies a wilful ignorance, one that understands the severity of the situation yet chooses bleakly to accept it. Balram puts this down to the 'perpetual servitude' (176) ingrained into those who populate the inland villages of India, or the 'Darkness' (14): 'a servitude so strong that you can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse' (176).

In "Appearances", however, Ahmad proffers a less cynical reason for these passive forms of resistance: her protagonist, Safdar Khan, observes the source of resistance as the curbed circulation of information from a government that acts purposefully opaque. 'No one knows who's running the show,' Safdar narrates, 'no one knows what's going on here' (*A* 13). However, Kammu, who works with Safdar for the same family, always insists on the luck of their situation. A naïve but perceptive character, Kammu is the vehicle through which Ahmad proposes that it is internalised emotional manipulation (as well as an employee's reliance on their source of income, however pitiful the stipend) which blinds people to their exploitative circumstances. 'Our wages are just pocket money,' Kammu reminds Safdar, 'we have no expenses for food, shelter, clothing' (19). Basic needs, swathed in packaging that distinguishes them as luxuries, are provided by employers as part of their service. Without explicitly saying so, Kammu implies that this meagre provision is enough of a reason for them to stay.

The characters' awareness of their exploitation and their inward sense of conflict are magnified as modes of resistance while they contend with their

plight. In that light, Safdar's small epiphanies, or age-old displeasures that are only now bubbling to the surface – 'I've got to leave' (*A* 13) – attain a qualitative significance. His awareness of the subtle oppressions that domestic workers are subjected to is in fact a monolithic obstacle to overcome: this awareness itself is a novel form of resistance. Ray and Qayum write: 'In societies like India, with long and unbroken histories of domestic servitude, the institution is central to understanding self and society' (537). Here, there is an implicit reference to Althusser's theory of interpellation – internalising cultural values of conflating the domestic and the familiar. For Balram and Safdar, contending with these situations and understanding their internalised exploitation are central to their processes of liberation, allowing them to fully form their identities.

In *The White Tiger*, the identity of the employee is unconsciously tethered to that of their employer. Our protagonist Balram describes the ragtag fraternity of the drivers' circle, and how one driver's status in it 'had been low', because 'his master drove only a Maruti-Suzuki Zen' (*TWT* 153). When his 'master' gives him a mobile phone, however, the social politics shift in his favour. The culture of servitude is felt profoundly even in this minute example of one's personal worth becoming intertwined with that of one's employer. The most degrading – if ironic – part is that this shiny symbol of newfound respect is a device designed to fortify the driver's servitude: 'it's a one-way phone,' he explains, 'so that my master can call me and give me instructions' (152). As Hegel once wrote, self-consciousness can only be formed when 'the pure undifferentiated "I" is its first immediate object', not a latent self-identification with another (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 110). His renowned master–slave dialectic has been described as 'the spine of [Adiga's] novel' where 'the servant kills the master to achieve his freedom' (Jeffries). Yet Balram never fully shakes off the yoke of servitude and tethered identity; despite all his successes, he continues to think of himself in terms of his ex-employer, imitating him so assiduously that he adopts his name when he starts his own taxi company: 'Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur' (*TWT* 302). This ongoing cross-identification (Tickell 162) serves to reinforce rather than resist the structure of domestic dominance; and it seems significant that Balram continues to work in the chauffeur business as another kind of

servant, even after killing his master and becoming ostensibly ‘a free man’ (*TWT* 285).

The rhetoric of love

Adiga toys with irony throughout *The White Tiger*. While Balram derides Hanuman as a god ‘foisted on’ India’s working class – he being the ‘shining example of how to serve your masters with absolute fidelity, love, and devotion’ (19) – the novel’s epistolary form insinuates that this is a scourge the narrator himself has not escaped. While writing to Mr Jiabao, the Chinese official – and voiceless recipient of his life’s story – Balram addresses him with all the accoutrements of respect: ‘Do you know about Hanuman, sir?’, the last word latched onto the sentence like a head nodding in instinctive deference, even when one ‘didn’t want it to’ (*TWT* 16). To whom is Balram really speaking? Adiga’s utilisation of the epistolary form is perhaps an illuminating act of resistance on its own: by fictionally addressing a Chinese politician to ‘reveal the truth about Bangalore’ through Balram, when Adiga is really writing for anglophone readers, he manipulates the novel’s form to imbue the act of composing it with a kind of interpellated deference.

In “Appearances”, Ahmad’s characters also question this nature of servitude. ‘Where does it come from,’ her protagonist Safdar muses, ‘that servant’s voice?’ Alone in his narrative, Safdar seems to be aware of the uncomfortable expectations of the domestic worker, of not only loyalty, but of genuine love³, too, observing that this is what ties Kammu to the ‘high-blooded’ (18) family they serve. Kammu recounts one occasion when his employer struck him and the only form of apology he received was: ‘Maybe that was a bit harsh, boy, but you don’t run away from your own family, do you?’ (21). Kammu finds himself seduced by that word ‘family’ and tells Safdar that the idea of his boss seeing him as one of his own ‘touched [his] heart’. Safdar notices how his employers use these terms of endearment – the ‘rhetoric of love’, as per Ray and Qayum (537) – in their interactions with him, too: ‘Sorry, Safdar Bhai,’ (*A* 18) says his mistress,

³ Ray and Qayum 536: ‘If loyalty is one measure of a servant’s worth, their love is another.’

Zari, calling him Bhai, or 'brother', to soften the fact that she has again kept him waiting. 'I hate the false note,' he registers, 'that's no real apology'. He knows that she insists on his calling her Baji, or 'sister', to blur the lines between paid labour and the voluntary favours between siblings; it is, after all, far more inconsiderate to keep a stranger waiting than an intimate member of one's family. Equally, he notices that Zari's mother addresses him as Beta, or 'son', when she wants something from him: 'she never does that' (25) usually.

Ahmad deftly presents Safdar's awareness of the pernicious effects of this rhetoric of love: a discourse that 'hides exploitation' (Ray and Qayum 537). If Safdar's employer is seen as a maternal figure, she is also then within her rights to discipline him as would a mother: to dictate what he wears and how he comports himself, and to punish him. As Ray and Qayum write: 'Domestic servitude confuses and complicates the conceptual divide between family and work' (537). Safdar says, 'Out here, we're groping in the dark. Limping along the best we can. Like bats, we cling to the caves we know' (*A* 13). This culmination of awareness, of contending with one's situation in a 'half-irritated, half-resigned' state (12), is emboldening for Safdar and subversive of a culturally expected attitude of meek servitude.

The rhetoric of love is in Adiga's consciousness as well. In *The White Tiger*, much of Balram's affection for his employer lies in how Ashok speaks of him like family, despite how he may treat him: 'This fellow, we can trust him. He's from home' (*TWT* 122). The process of battling instilled ideals and unquestioned facts of social life is the first necessary step towards expressing outward resistance. One cannot help but notice this insidious rhetoric working on a macrocosmic scale outside the realm of fiction. In her recent essay on Prime Minister Narendra Modi's calamitous lockdown of India, Arundhati Roy wrote that '[Modi] said he was taking this decision not just as a prime minister, but as a family elder' (208). How else, she observes, would one person be able to single-handedly sanction 'that a nation of 1.38bn people should be locked down with zero preparation and with four hours' notice' (208)? Roy writes that of all the people she spoke to following Modi's announcement, the words of one man, 'a carpenter called Ramjeet', were particularly discomfiting.

‘Maybe when Modiji decided to do this, nobody told him about us,’ he tells her, ‘maybe he doesn’t know about us’, the other half of India. But ‘us’, writes Roy, ‘means approximately 460m people’ (211).

Playing the game: servants against servants

Balram’s psychology is one that views the ‘ethically-suspect method’ of violence as ‘the only viable option for a subaltern’ (Khor 44). He suggests that ‘no normal human being’ (*TWT* 176) is able to break out of the Rooster Coop; it would take only ‘a freak, a pervert of nature’ (67), ‘a White Tiger’ (177). His dialect is divisive, but more peculiarly, it dehumanises not the rich, but the poor – and, by an additional metaphorical extension, himself. The wealthy, present in the figure of the ‘grinning young butcher’ (173), are the only human beings in the conjured scene. As a subaltern who sees himself faced with either the fatal option of being a rooster destined for the butcher’s knife or the monstrous glory that comes with being a genetically-perverse monster – ‘a social entrepreneur’ (177) – he views his subjugation primarily in oppositional terms, conceptualising resistance as a form of contending against, not with, his structure of dominance.

It is also significant to think about who it is that Balram really views as his oppressor. Despite persistent lamentations about the unfairness of the Indian social structure, his argument is not *against* the system that facilitates a nationwide culture of servitude per se; it is aimed more specifically at his own employer. He is neither interested in righting ‘the wrongs of class apartheid’ (Khor 44), nor claiming to do so; his complaint seems to exist on a purely personal scale. While Balram excoriates the unjust social hierarchy, his plan is not to improve the system, but to manipulate it and wrangle his way to the top. This is glaringly obvious in his lack of compassion for other members of the serving classes: against his better conscience, he declines to show mercy to Ram Persad after forcibly ejecting him from his position, and his only friend is never described by any name but ‘Vitiligo-Lips’ (*TWT* 153). Balram’s tone of absolute conviction can be problematic, and it has also, notes Megha Anwer, earned Adiga his own share of contention, in the manner of focussing almost solely on the

negative aspects of India (Anwer 306). Balram's claim that 'servants need to abuse other servants', that it is something 'bred into us' (*TWT* 130), is not as universal as Balram imagines it, when the *The White Tiger* is read in conjunction with "Appearances".

In "Appearances", the relationship between Safdar and Kammu is vastly different to the 'servant-versus-servant' (*TWT* 109) mentality in *The White Tiger*. Safdar refers to Kammu as his only form of comfort in their employer's house: 'Every single time Baji annoys me, I talk to Kammu. That's how I've lasted in this job' (*A* 20). Their relationship is one of solidarity and counsel. Balram and Safdar are individual products of their environments of servitude, fictional proof that within the same structure of dominance, there exist different types of oppression and individual embodiments of resistance to these oppressions. Safdar's concerns, unlike Balram's, are not personal: 'I'm angry some,' he says of Zari, 'not with her so much as her kind' (*A* 21).

Balram's unpunished murder of Ashok panders to the system of rottenness more than defies it. Adiga's greatest joke, and his novel's greatest tragedy, is that his subaltern figure trumps his oppressive structure by complying with its demands of moral corruption. By taking the fall for his employee, Asif, when he accidentally kills a boy in a subversion of Pinky's hit-and-run, Balram reinforces rather than undermines the corrupt system, even as he tries to change it for the better. His intentions may be different – he confronts the family and owns up to his employee's mistake: 'I accept my responsibility. I ask for your forgiveness' – but the sentiment of throwing money at a problem to make it disappear – 'That is the way of the jungle we live in' (*TWT* 312) – is much the same as the rooster-coop system he criticises.

This is not to say that Balram is a wholly reprehensible character, but rather one who is propelled by 'entrepreneurial self-advancement' (Tickell 155). He displays moments of tenderness for his subaltern class and a burgeoning hatred of Ashok when his employer mistreats not only him, but other subalterns as well. When Ashok sees an autorickshaw driver coughing violently, Balram silently bristles at his careless comment – 'It's like we're at a concert of spitting!' (*TWT* 138) – by thinking: 'Well, if you

were out there breathing that acid air, you'd be spitting like him too'. This is reminiscent of a scene in Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film *Parasite*: what ultimately spurs employee Kim Ki-taek to kill his employer – the straw that broke the camel's back, idiomatically speaking – is the supercilious disgust on his boss' face when he sees the housekeeper's husband bleeding to death on his lawn.

Defying the systems of oppression

Safdar is a subordinate who stands his ground in the face of implicit exploitation. He feels 'resigned but brittle' (A 21); his small ways of contending with his plight manifest into a greater resistance altogether. He takes his fate into his own hands, learning to entrust his destiny neither to the invisible leaders of the country⁴ nor to any heavenly powers.⁵ Safdar attempts small, resistive acts to cope with his dissatisfaction – 'when I'm seething inside, I refuse to call her Baji' (18) – reclaiming, at least for himself, a separation between work and life. When his objection leaves scant impression on his oppressor – 'she ignores my little protest' (18) – he realises he will have to contend with his situation in a more confrontational manner. A recurring symbol for Safdar's deterioration of self are his hands, which he feels have 'been swapped with someone else's' (12). They stare at him throughout the story 'like a hostile neighbour' (17), a physical sign of resistance that reminds him constantly of his need to escape. He can no longer find 'the black mole' on his left forefinger, the 'visible identifying mark' (12) listed on his passport that he would need to present if he wanted to travel, or flee. Later, in the moments culminating towards his seminal act of resistance, he feels, 'with a pang of horror', that his feet have been swapped, too. This seems to be a moment when the somatic realm interacts with the linguistic. In a psychoanalytic sense, Safdar's hands and feet manifest his burgeoning sense of self-alienation, and his desire to escape his circumstances.

⁴ Ahmad, "Appearances" 13: 'Kammu worries and asks me at times if I think anyone is running the country or not? I shrug and say nothing. I don't think anyone is, but I don't like to worry him.'

⁵ Ibid 14: 'I say a little prayer: 'Yaa Allah, if You won't end this chaos and confusion, then at least get me out of here, before I turn into someone I don't recognise.'

When Safdar hands in his notice, he performs two triumphs of resistance: decisively flouting Zari's 'automatic' (28) correction to call him Baji – “‘Begum Saab,’ I repeat”; he also resigns from his post by supplying a reason – ‘I’m leaving for Dubai’ – that will propel him to do what he has wanted to from the beginning: ‘to go somewhere, anywhere, out of here’ (13). He drives with alien feet, which feel like ‘claws ripping through [his] white socks’ (28); the claws, one might say, of a newly-freed white tiger. These are not acts of disobedience, but decisive moments of invoking his rights. In a similar vein, although *The White Tiger*'s plot is centred around a chauffeur murdering his exploitative employer, the most satisfying resistance is Balram's implicit relinquishment of the ugly spectre of caste. Throughout the novel, he manages to defy the occupation presaged by his name. ‘That’s what you people do,’ one man sneers at Balram early on in the novel, ‘You make sweets. How can you learn to drive?’ (*TWT* 56). ‘Halwai, my name, means “sweet-maker”,’ Balram offers, by way of explanation. ‘That’s my caste—my destiny’ (63). His strongest act of resistance is not, ironically, killing the man who sees him only as his driver, but of indirectly defying caste-based expectations.

Conclusion

As Medina puts it, resistance is not exclusively about contending against structures of dominance. Indeed, “Appearances” and *The White Tiger* demonstrate how the protagonists’ greatest feats of resisting unjust authority are found, first and foremost, in their efforts to contend with their internal dissatisfaction and to obtain firm recognition of their own personal worth. Their most triumphant resistance is obtaining a rebellious understanding of their entitlement to a better life. Adiga gives away clues to this concept of resistance in Balram's description of *Murder Weekly*, a magazine popular ‘among all the servants’ (*TWT* 125), which the government supposedly uses to play on the employee's secret fantasy of murdering their employer. Instead of giving the magazine the allure of contraband, Adiga takes a perverse move by awarding it the cheap accessibility of religious parables, spewing a strange moral lesson where the murderer is always eventually caught, and is ‘so mentally disturbed and

sexually deranged that not one reader would want to be like him'. Here, Adiga punctuates the novel with its most thrilling irony: Balram is aware that violence, the ultimate display of contending against power, is not necessarily the wisest 'way out of individual poverty' (Khor 49). He believes that knowledge and awareness are the better weapons: 'it's when your driver starts to read about Gandhi and the Buddha that it's time to wet your pants, Mr Jiabao' (*TWT* 126).

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