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## A Study of Metaphors in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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### Abstract

One of the aims of literary text is to say as much briefly as possible to convey the maximum. In other words, it aims to say more in few words to achieve a maximum effect. Metaphor, a figure of speech, has an important role, as it includes figurative meaning of words besides its literary meaning. In this article, metaphors in Arvind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger* have been studied to find out how they contribute to the portrayal of the perpetual intent of the author on one hand, and help the reader's comprehension on the other.

### Keywords

Figurative language; Metaphor; Aravind Adiga; *The White Tiger*.

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Figures of speech are important tools in both literature and ordinary communication and they are used to illustrate a subject figuratively. The language that uses figures of speech is called 'figurative language' and "its

purpose is to serve the elements of clarity and beauty in the language” (Tajali 100). Metaphor is one of the most extensively used figures of speech. Metaphor is essential to the functioning of language and have been the subject of copious analyses, and sharp disagreements, by rhetoricians, linguists, literary critics, and philosophers of language. Metaphor is used in literature to provide insights into how things really are and guide our thinking about their topic. The function of a metaphor in literature is two-fold. The first, and more practical, function is to allow the reader greater understanding of the concept, object, or character being described, which is done by comparing it to an item that may be more familiar to the reader. The second function is to produce the desired result by the writer by creating an image that is beautiful or profound. Thus, metaphor serves mainly to enhance the rhetorical force and stylistic vividness and pleasantness of a discourse.

Metaphor makes an implicit, implied or hidden comparison between two things or objects that are poles apart from each other but have some characteristics common between them. In other words, a resemblance of two contradictory or different objects is made based on a single or some common characteristics. M. H. Abrams in his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines metaphor as “a word or expression that in literal usage denotes one kind of thing is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing, without asserting a comparison”. A metaphor is an implied simile. The word “*metaphor*” comes from the Greek, ‘*meta* – over; ‘*phero*’ – carry which literally means “a carrying over”; and by this figure of speech a word is transferred, or carried over, from the object to which it belongs to another in such a manner that a comparison is implied, though not clearly stated. The first definition of metaphor is expressed by Aristotle as “a shift carrying over a word from its normal use to a new one” (Richards 89).

There are different views about metaphor like the similarity view, the interactive view, the pragmatic view, the cognitive (or conceptual) view put forth by different writers and philosophers like Aristotle, I.A. Richards, Donald Davidson, George Lakoff and Mark Turner respectively. Examples of metaphor

in literature appear in the earliest surviving literary works, including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, from 1000 B.C., and Homer's *Odyssey*. Writers like Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Sylvia Plath and others used metaphors extensively in their works. John Donne, a metaphysical poet, was well known for his abundant use of metaphors throughout his poetical works.

Metaphor and symbol are related, but generally a metaphor is used to draw a comparison between two distinct objects, whereas a symbol is used as a stand-in for a much more complex, and generally more abstract idea. A difference between metaphors and symbols is that symbols are more succinct. In literature, a metaphor would typically be used in a specific instance to compare two objects, but a symbol would be used throughout the work as a major part of the theme. The difference between a metaphor and a symbol is that a metaphor is a direct substitution of one idea or object for another, while a symbol is used to imply something else. Metaphors change their surface meanings, but the inner meaning is unchanging. The surface meaning of symbols is less important than the inner meaning. Thus, it is clear that a symbol and a metaphor are two distinct things.

Arvind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger*, is a commentary on the contemporary and almost universal theme of poverty and frustration of modern man. Marginalized people are usually discriminated, ignored and often suppressed on the basis of race, caste, gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, occupation, education and economy by the mainstream. The same happened to Balram, the son of Vikram Halwai, a rickshaw puller, who was born in Laxmangarh, in the district of Gaya. Through the novel, the author presents the subaltern voice through the voice of Balram Halwai, a self-styled successful entrepreneur. Written in the epistolary form, the novel is a series of letters written over the period of seven nights from Balram Halwai alias Ashok Sharma, a self-styled 'Thinking Man and an entrepreneur' to Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier who is 'on a mission' who 'wants to know the truth about Bangalore'. The novel depicts the story about a compelling, angry and darkly humorous

man's journey from Indian village life to entrepreneurial success. The representation of Balram's status in the beginning of the novel is like subaltern destitute. However, at the end of the novel we find him holding the position, which was ideologically and socially restricted for him. He achieved this higher status through manipulation, murder and acquisition of wealth. The metamorphosis in the life of the protagonist of the novel from Munna—Balram Halwai—White Tiger—Ashok Sharma clearly presents the degradation of humanity as a compulsory trait of modernization. The novel is a remarkable study of politico-socio and cultural life of India. The metaphors like 'the white tiger', 'the darkness', 'the black fort', 'the chandelier', 'the rooster coop' etc. highlights the extreme reality of India. In fact, *The White Tiger* is a metaphor of contemporary Indian reality with all its colours.

Animals are the best metaphors *inter alia* in *The White Tiger*. The metaphors of animals used sharply fit the situation and they depict the psyche of the people briefly. The most striking aspect of the language in the novel is the use of metaphor, of which the title is the most obvious example. Balram, around whom the story of the novel revolves, is referred to as 'the white tiger' which signifies power, freedom and individuality. The metaphor used in the title, *The White Tiger* reveals the psyche of the central character, Balram Halwai. The White Tiger is kingly, predatory, harmful and a rare species, resembling the nature of the character here. He is the one who got out of the "darkness" and found his way into the "light". There is an interesting story behind how Balram earns this nickname, 'the white tiger', the symbol for rare talent. In his school at Laxmangarh, he impresses a visiting school official with his intelligence and reading skills. The inspector also presents a parting gift a book entitled '*Lessons for Young Boys from the Life of Mahatma Gandhi*'. The inspector praised Balram calling an intelligent, honest and vivacious fellow in the crowd of thugs and idiots:

In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals the creature that comes along only once in a generation? I thought about it and said: 'The White Tiger'. 'That's what you are in this jungle'. (35)

The metaphor of 'the white tiger' is in the stark contrast with the other metaphors of 'the human spiders' as the protagonist himself puts, are the tea-shop workers who never get anything in life, not even the healthy body far to talk of materialistic things and comfortable life.

Go to a tea shop anywhere along the Ganga, sir, and look at the men working in that tea shop—men, I say, but better to call them human spiders that go crawling in between and under the tables with rags in their hands, crushed humans in crushed uniforms, sluggish, unshaven, in their thirties or forties or fifties but still "boys." (51)

Furthermore, the drivers call the same person, Balram ('the white tiger'), 'country mouse' in Delhi. In addition to the title, there are several other examples of metaphors throughout the book, both in the descriptions of various scenes, and the names of certain characters, whose nicknames like Stork, Mongoose, Wild Boar, Raven, Buffalo and others allow the reader to imagine the characters and the scenes that they inhabit more easily, and therefore enables them to become more involved in the narrative. Arvind Adiga takes us directly into the jungle, that is, the contemporary India.

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.

The Stork was a fat man with a fat mustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flowed 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.

His brother was called the Wild Boar. This fellow owned all the good agricultural land around Laxmangarh. If you wanted to work

on those lands, you had to bow down to his feet, and touch the dust under his slippers, and agree to swallow his day wages. When he passed by women, his car would stop; the windows would roll down to reveal his grin; two of his teeth, on either side of his nose, were long and curved, like little tusks.

The Raven owned the worst land, which was the dry, rocky hillside around the fort, and took a cut from the goatherds who went up there to graze with their flocks. If they didn't have their money, he liked to dip his beak into their backsides, so they called him the Raven.

The Buffalo was greediest of the lot. He had eaten up the rickshaws and the roads. So if you ran a rickshaw, or used the road, you had to pay him his feed—one-third of whatever you earned, no less.

All four of the Animals lived in high-walled mansions just outside Laxmangarh—the landlords' quarters. They had their own temples inside the mansions, and their own wells and ponds, and did not need to come out into the village except to feed. (24-25)

In addition to the metaphors used for different animals, the metaphor of non-living things like chandelier also depicts an aspect of Indian life. Hanging in Balram's Bangalore office is a vintage chandelier. He frequently looks at it for "inspiration," confessing to "staring" for long periods. The chandelier comes to depict the "light" of Bangalore and Balram's new life.

Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, a Booker Prize Winning Novel, depicts the sordid reality of imbalanced society of two different Indias in one: "an India of light, and an India of darkness". Balram, the protagonist-narrator of the novel, uses two metaphors to describe the life of the people in India. The poor live in 'the darkness', whereas the rich live in 'the light'. He inhabits the darkness, a place where basic necessities are routinely snatched by the capitalist class that live in the 'light'. Balram is the mouthpiece of the author who exposes the poor-

rich divide that surrounds India in the backdrop of economic prosperity, in the wake of the IT revolution. It is the India of the 'darkness' that the novel sympathizes with, presenting a desolate, gloomy and brutally realistic image of it. The 'dark' India is rotten, corrupted and blackened to the core by those who are filthy rich.

India is two countries into one, India of Light and an India of Darkness. Ocean brings light to my county. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off but the river brings darkness to India. (14)

The metaphor of 'the Black Fort' is the architectural centrepiece of Balram's village. As a child he is afraid to go alone, but he conquers this fear as he gets older. It later becomes his sanctuary, where he goes to contemplate his misfortune. The fort is located high on a hill, and as he looks down on his village, he vows to escape from 'the Rooster Coop' and never to return. Balram recalls the line of a famous Muslim poet, Iqbal about slaves: "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world" (40). Even as a boy, Balram could see what was 'beautiful' in the world:

Putting my foot on the wall, I looked down on the village from there. My little Laxmangarh. I saw the temple tower, the market, the glistening line of sewage, the landlords' mansions—and my own house, with that dark little cloud outside—the water buffalo. It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth.

I leaned out from the edge of the fort in the direction of my village—and then I did something too disgusting to describe to you.

Well, actually, I spat. Again and again. And then, whistling and humming, I went back down the hill.

Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat. (41-42)

Adiga is very pictorial in his description of the protagonist, who plans his crime well in advance. His disgusting act of spitting repeatedly in the direction

of his village could be a metaphor of final rejection of everything he holds dear, to escape from 'the Rooster Coop' of misery.

The metaphor of 'the Rooster Coop' runs throughout the novel. The author frequently mentions the rooster coop when describing the situation or characteristics of the servant class in India. In the novel, Adiga talks about how Balram was in a rooster coop and how he broke free from his coop. Adiga employs this metaphor to describe the Indian servant-master system. He confirms that the trustworthiness of servants is the basis of the entire Indian economy. This is a paradox and a mystery of India.

Every day, on the roads of Delhi, some chauffeur is driving an empty car with a black suitcase sitting on the backseat. Inside that suitcase is a million, two million rupees; more money than that chauffeur will see in his lifetime. If he took the money he could go to America, Australia, anywhere, and start a new life. He could go inside the five-star hotels he has dreamed about all his life and only seen from the outside. He could take his family to Goa, to England. Yet he takes that black suitcase where his master wants. He puts it down where he is meant to, and never touches a rupee. Why?

Because Indians are the world's most honest people, like the prime minister's booklet will inform you?

No. It's because 99.9 percent of us are caught in the Rooster Coop just like those poor guys in the poultry market. (174-175)

According to Adiga, the poor people in India are 'half-baked' and he compared them with the chickens that are kept in 'the Rooster Coop'. Balram is also caged like the chickens in the rooster coop. Being the White Tiger, he has to break out of the cage to freedom. The author first describes how the rooster coop looks like in the market in Old Delhi, in order to give the visualization to the targeted audience:

Hundreds of pale hens and brightly coloured roosters stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking



each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench. The roosters in the coop smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they are next, yet they cannot rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with humans in this country (173-4).

By 'the Rooster Coop' the key metaphor of the novel, Adiga means that the capitalist elite have managed to guard the coop from inside. No servant lets another servant try to escape. "Servants need to abuse other servants. It has been bred into us; the way Alsatian dogs are bred to attack strangers, we attack anyone who is familiar." (130) According to Adiga, the liability for the suffering of the servant also lies with the mentality of the servant class, which he refers as 'perpetual servitude'. This ideology is so strong that "one can put the key of his emancipation in a man's hands and he will throw it back at you with a curse" (147). Balram too becomes an entrepreneur of the new India. Though his methods to resist and get success is unethical but Arvind Adiga justifies Balram's action by saying that 'he has violated the trust reposed in him by his master, but that is the way to get out of the jungle'.

Yet even if all my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor—even if they throw me in jail and have all the other prisoners dip their beaks into me—even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose—I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat. I'll say it was all worthwhile to know, just for a day, just for an hour, just for a minute, what it means not to be a servant. (320-321)

Figures of speech are imaginative tools in both literary and non-literary language used for explaining speech beyond its usual usage. The use of figures of speech, especially metaphor has effects on the writer's style and the reader's understanding. Different metaphors used in the novel, *The White Tiger*, facilitate the understanding of Indian socio-cultural and politico-economic condition even

to non-Indians as well as contributes in essence to the identity of the author among others.

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