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Driving Pinky Madam (and Murdering Mr Ashok): Social Justice and Domestic Service in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

In January 2014 an international diplomatic scandal erupted over the arrest and custodial treatment of Devyani Khobragade, India's deputy Consul-General in New York. United States Marshals had apprehended Khobragade the previous month on a charge of perjury because she had apparently made false declarations on visa documents relating to the employment of her maid, Sangeeta Richard. On the visa form Khobragade had promised that her maid would be paid \$4,5000 a month, but she had in fact already signed a private contract agreeing to pay her only \$573 per month (far less than the minimum New York wage of \$7.25 per hour). Tired of enduring the apparently restrictive and exploitative conditions of her employment, Richard left her job and sought help from a US-based victim support group, Safe Horizon.

Because Khobragade was not an embassy diplomat she could only claim limited immunity and the circumstances of her arrest caused outrage in India when it was reported that she had been strip-searched and kept in a cell with other criminal defendants before being released on bail. Khobragade's treatment, which US officials later insisted was consistent with their arrest-procedures, may have caused her personal embarrassment but it was also deeply humiliating to Indian national pride; the insult was exacerbated by Khobragade's social identity as a woman (the daughter of a respected Indian civil servant) and a member of the dalit caste. In India, the news of her arrest ignited popular protests in a number of Indian cities, calls were made for Washington to apologise and retaliatory diplomatic pressure was exerted on the US Embassy in Delhi. In order to protect Khobragade, the Indian government quickly transferred her to the Indian Mission at the UN, thus affording her full diplomatic immunity – she was subsequently indicted for visa fraud and making false statements in relation to her employment of a domestic worker, and left the US for India shortly afterwards (her husband, a US citizen, stayed in the country with their children). The charges against her were later dropped, but the affair soured relations between India and the United States and the subsequent resignation of the US ambassador to India, Nancy Powell, looked retrospectively like a belated and rather clumsy palliative measure.

At the time, Sangeeta Richard's plight was serious enough to prompt an American workers' rights group, the National Domestic Workers Alliance, to stage protests outside the Indian Consulate in New York. Yet in the ensuing international diplomatic row, the evidently exploitative employment conditions which Khobragade had forced her maid to accept were largely forgotten. In fact in India there was condemnation of her actions, and suspicion that she had engineered the incident in order to blackmail her boss and benefit herself.ⁱ *The Times of India* reported that there was a widely held belief that Richard had played the system to emigrate to the USⁱⁱ and as the case progressed Richard's nearest relatives were extradited to the United States, a move which led the embittered Khobragade to state, as she left America, 'you have lost a good friend. It is unfortunate. In return, you got a maid and a drunken driver. They are in, we are out.'ⁱⁱⁱ (The insult of Khobragade's treatment as a diplomat baulked larger in the public consciousness than the relatively trivial matter of a dispute with one's servants, and this response should be seen in the context of America's illegal use of diplomatic immunity laws to protect its own intelligence operatives in South Asia.^{iv}) Yet the marked lack of sympathy for the initial victim in the case, Sangeeta Richard, also an Indian woman working abroad, says

something important about the way servants and domestic workers fail as legitimate figures in public discourses about political identity.

Until recently servants and domestic workers have had a similarly marginal place in Indian fiction in English. Admittedly, a sustained critical interest in the subaltern has led to an important, highly theorised focus on women's domestic work in translated fiction (such as Gayatri Spivak's commentaries on Mahasweta Devi's writing), and to fictional engagements with social marginality in Indian-English novels — caste-discrimination and labour in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), disability in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* (2007) or the urban underclass in Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) — but Indian novelists have generally been unwilling to incorporate the experience of domestic work centrally into their writing. Instead, Indian novels before the turn of the millennium tend to represent domestic workers in the familiar tropes of the European canon: as supplementary facets of the narrative, as comic or irritant bit-part actors, as isolated voices or rhetorical performances. In short, the largely middle-class milieus of the Indian novel have given us a highly mediated, highly 'literary' image of the domestic worker from the perspective of those who are able to control and define the relations of economic and cultural capital.

The routine effacement of the servant and the deeply-ingrained representational idioms which govern literary depictions of servants are crucial to our understanding of how the contemporary Indian novel makes its political claims because, like the embodiment of the working classes in the figure of the servant in nineteenth-century European fiction, the presence of the domestic worker in Indian writing focusses a number of wider political and social issues, among them the experience of caste and caste-difference, the issue of liberal responsibility, the widening economic divide between urban and rural India, and the changing meaning of the family as a social unit. Moreover, as I will suggest below, the relative invisibility of domestic workers in the homes of Indian fiction is only just starting to be questioned as the novel interrogates emergent forms of self-identity in the so-called New India. Before these literary strategies can be considered, however, it is necessary to outline some relevant contexts of domestic labour.

Research evidence on paid domestic work suggests that in post-industrial countries in the global north the employment of domestic workers (primarily migrant, female maids, cleaners and nannies) is on the increase, and studies of the employment conditions of domestic workers in the United States and the UK show that the Khobragade case was far from unique. (At present 23% of domestic workers in the US earn below the state minimum wage, and the servants of diplomats are one of the groups most vulnerable to mistreatment.) Because domestic work takes place in the home and is performed beyond the jurisdiction of the state, it is one of the most exploited and poorly regulated forms of labour, and globally domestic workers suffer what the International Labour Organization (the ILO) term 'decent work deficits' and frequently lack adequate legal rights and social protections (Chen). The main differences between domestic employment practices in the global north and India is the relative availability and cost of domestic labour, with a much more established culture of employing domestic workers existing across the middle class in the subcontinent. Levels of literacy and education are lower amongst domestic workers in South Asia and full-time servants are more common, but the prevalence of migrant workers in domestic roles internationally — workers who, like Khobragade's maid, often depend on their employers for immigration certification — complicates broad generalisations.

Drawing on UN social development statistics, N. Neetha and Rajni Palriwala estimate that between 1999 and 2005, those in domestic work in India, the majority of whom were women, increased from under half a million to over 2.5 million, and more recent surveys indicate that around 4% of the total *urban* workforce in India is now employed informally in domestic labour (Chen). As we noted above, domestic workers often have little formal education: 57% of the total workforce in India surveyed in 2004–5 was 'illiterate', a lack which must be attributed to socio-economic background since 'Scheduled Castes form a relatively large proportion of domestic workers (33.4%) and the majority of migrant workers' (Neetha and Palriwala 103; Frøystad). Compared with its well-defined and detailed rulings on workplace law, Indian labour

law has little to say about domestic work. Domestic workers were only included in the official definition of 'worker' in the Unorganised Sector Workers Social Security Act of 2008 (Nimushakavi 33), and even given the applicability of current laws, such as the Minimum Wages Act and the Maternity Benefit Act, informal or casual domestic work is largely unregulated, with officials defending this lack by arguing that, if the mandatory minimum wage was enacted uniformly, many households would not be able to afford to employ domestic workers (ibid. 34). Even so, pressure groups like the National Domestic Workers' Movement have lobbied for the implementation of ILO directives (and campaigned against issues such as trafficking, forced migration and child domestic labour) and have been instrumental in improving the legislative recognition of domestic workers.

In studies of cultural perceptions of domestic work, social scientists and cultural commentators alike attest to the centrality of servants to middle-class life in India. In their research on attitudes to servants amongst middle-class families in Bengal, Ray and Qayum note that middle-class identity often includes particular expectations about domestic tasks and the status associated with not involving oneself in forms of domestic labour. The 'culture of servitude' in Kolkata depends on the 'foundational premise' of the indispensability of servants to the functioning of middle- and upper-class households (54; see also Banerjee 693). These ideas have their historical roots in the specifically colonial formation of the Kolkata *bhadralok*, or respectable class, in which clerks were blocked from preferment in the colonial administration and sought a compensatory authority in the private sphere, creating a postcolonial legacy in which domestic work is often still expected to be 'managed' rather than performed (64). The middle class in Bengal cannot be taken as nationally representative, but the automatic assumption that one's social expectations include forms of service is resonant in Indian middle-class life, and is part of a nostalgic generational memory which sees service as profoundly imbricated in the experience of home.

The rise of a new urban middle class as the main beneficiary of India's economic liberalisation after 1991 has not lessened the demand for domestic service, although there is evidence that the social contours of employment in the home have changed. (Liberalisation also appears to have opened up new, alternative employment opportunities for urban domestic workers.) Because of pressures on residential space in urban India, middle-class households are now less likely to employ multiple servants, or to have servants live with them; in turn maids or domestic workers, usually women, may be employed on a part-time basis by several families or hired from an agency. Yet the ability to purchase cheap domestic labour is still intrinsic to the comfort and status of middle-class families and has far-reaching implications for civic identity and political equality. As Ray and Qayum note, in believing that employing servants is a necessity, the new middle class in India 'reproduce as normal an unequal society in which groups naturally divide along class lines and in which lower classes naturally serve higher classes. Employers act as though class divisions are immutable while striving to constantly recreate class inequality' (9).

If the employment of servants is taken for granted as a 'sign of class achievement' amongst large sections of the middle class in India, the presence of the often lower class, lower caste domestic worker in the home is far from straightforward. Thus ethnographers like Sara Dickey have suggested that employers perceived their servants as worryingly liminal figures — representing an unpredictable and potentially ungovernable connection with the outside world. Through the servant, dirt, disease and disorder may be brought into the clean, ordered domestic space or, conversely, 'symbolic and material capital may escape the home, via the servant, through gossip and theft' (Dickey 473). Conventionally, the transgressive threat posed by the servant's presence is counteracted by the careful mediation of closeness and distance between employer and employee, and the enforcement of strict rules about workers' appearance and their access to more or less culturally and symbolically 'pure' spaces within the home (ibid.). The most threatening transgressive possibility embodied by the domestic worker is that of tabooed sexual contact between employer and employee, although when such encounters inevitably happen, they tend to have very different, gender-biased outcomes for the servants and family members involved.

The experiential complexity of domestic employment, with its intimate evasions, anxieties, and interdependencies, is, I will argue, exactly what contemporary novels such as Thrity Umrigar's *The Space Between Us* (2004) and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) have started to gauge, and the rest of this paper will deal with Adiga's provocative representation of contemporary domestic service in the latter work. As we shall see below, in *The White Tiger* the servant, as well as providing an uncompromising perspective on middle class mores, is often the bearer of cultural meanings (to do with loyalty, obligation and family) which controvert or exist uneasily alongside a hegemonic narrative of neoliberal modernity. While the experimental co-optation of the narrative perspectives of domestic workers is to be applauded, these novels are clearly not written by former servants and, like the progressive fictions of an earlier generation of Indian authors, are open to familiar charges of objectification and silencing of the 'represented' subaltern. Issues of representational authenticity are so familiar in critical debates of the Indian novel in English that they will not be addressed comprehensively here, but will be reviewed in my introductory comments on Adiga's novel below.

The Servant's Tale

In his Man Booker Prize-winning novel of 2008 *The White Tiger*, Aravind Adiga makes the unusual choice of a domestic worker as his first-person narrator and, as suggested earlier, this figure represents a new novelistic awareness of the literary possibilities of the servant, and becomes the basis for a bitter, ironic commentary on the public narrative of India's global growth at the very moment of the country's post-millennial ascendancy. India's economic rise, suggests the novel, risks fomenting an irrepressible subaltern violence as a response to the visible unevenness of its rewards.

The White Tiger is the epistolary email narrative of Balram Halwai, a country boy made good, who manages to escape the grinding poverty of his village in Bihar to work for the family of a local village landlord in the regional town of Dhanbad. He subsequently becomes a factotum and driver for one of the family's sons, a non-resident-Indian, Mr Ashok, who has returned from New York and now lives with his wife, Pinky, in a modern apartment complex called 'Buckingham Towers' in New Delhi's commercial satellite-town, Gurgaon. Balram's story provides an often grotesque insider-view of the indignities visited upon servants in the middle-class homes of the New India, and relentlessly exposes the selective ethics of domestic service. Following a car accident in which his employers try to frame him for the apparent death of a street-child, Balram devises a plan to murder his master and kills him, absconding to Bangalore with Mr Ashok's money to set up a business supplying transport for the local IT industry. The dramatic force of Balram's narrative is that it pivots around an act of violence, the murder of an employee by a domestic worker, which symbolically overturns the hierarchical social relations that justify domestic service, but does so, satirically, in the idiom of entrepreneurial self-advancement. *The White Tiger* thus plays on the developing tensions between a culturally sanctioned narrative of deference (intrinsic to the meaning of service), and the self-validating, individualistic discourses of neoliberalism.

It is tempting to identify *The White Tiger*, along with more recent South-Asian 'entrepreneurial' novels such as Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013), as a work which represents a development of cosmopolitan reflexivity and a conscious undermining of the formal expectations about South-Asian fiction on the part of the western reader,^v whose literary preferences are questioned by Hamid's narrator when he derides the 'much praised, breathtakingly boring foreign novel' full of 'tar-slow prose and blush-inducing formal conceit' (Hamid 19). Indeed, to some extent the popularity of Adiga's *The White Tiger* for his international readership may derive precisely from the way his work plays to a certain irritation with the celebratory representations of South Asia routinely enjoined by liberal multiculturalism, an irritation triggered by the seeming incompatibility of India's economic rise with a continued discourse of postcolonial victimhood and a worthily affirmative representational politics.

Yet if *The White Tiger* second-guesses the more formulaic exoticisms of postcolonial South-Asian fiction, its view of rural life and the social netherworlds of casual labour and domestic service in urban India is so starkly caricatured that it still risks reinforcing certain deeply-ingrained neo-colonial assumptions about India as a place of cruelty and extreme poverty, and we will reflect further on this representational double bind shortly. The essential critical detail that must be established here, however, is that given its satirical force and cosmopolitan self-positioning, *The White Tiger* should not be read as inherently more 'realist' than other contemporary Indian novels (as some critics and reviewers have suggested — see Jeffries). Its author might style himself as a 'neo-realist', citing a debt to the documentary film-maker Ramin Bahrani, yet the realist aspects of his novel — such as its meticulous detailing of domestic service — exist in tension with the text's fabular metaphorical conceit. Here again Adiga could be said to second-guess reader-expectation about the folkloric naiveties of the rural subaltern's narrative, by presenting the text's political satire as a beast-fable, which evokes both the animism of Indian tribal arts, as well as more canonical colonial adaptations of the form such as Kipling's *The Jungle Book*.

While *The White Tiger* repositions itself in contradistinction to some established generic conventions of South-Asian fiction, I would argue that the staging of Balram's first-person epistolary narrative augments this formal tactic by situating itself outside the conventional dynamics of postcolonial literary production and consumption. Adiga's narrator thus slyly refuses any gestural 'postcolonial' accommodation of the reader in the global north, or any obligation to 'write back' to the old imperial centre, when he gleefully proclaims the redundancy and degeneracy of western culture: 'our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage, and drug abuse' (*WT* 3–4). Balram's casual homophobia and racism is of a piece with the novel's strategy of self-distancing from overtly worthy or politically correct pronouncements and, at a diegetic level, effectively 'provincialises' Europe, its narrator locating himself not on the margins of global power but at its heart, boldly signing himself 'from the desk of "The White Tiger" [...] in the world's centre of technology and outsourcing' in Bangalore (*WT* 3).

The discursive recalibration of Adiga's novel also occurs at the level of the implied reader: the Chinese premier Wen Jiabow, who is apparently visiting Bangalore on a diplomatic mission to meet Indian entrepreneurs. The ironies multiply here: Balram chooses his interlocutor because he wants to present his own story as an authentic account of Indian entrepreneurialism and also, tellingly, because of his sense of global history as a cycle of conquest and servitude, a history in which China has, he believes, escaped colonial enslavement: 'The British tried to make you their servants, but you never let them do it. I admire that, Mr Premier. I was a servant once, you see' (*WT* 5). As well as betraying Balram's own naïve hubris, the choice of a Chinese premier as email recipient also reflects a popular Indian consciousness of China as a rival superpower. At the same time, Adiga's text grafts other incongruously divergent images of servility, native-informancy and power onto itself by evoking both Sheherazade's nightly stories to another oriental sovereign in *A Thousand and One Nights* and, at a different cultural extreme, the insistent verbal force of the business self-help text.

In the conventional Horatio Alger idiom of the self-help story and its contemporary variants, the triumph over poverty is often didactically scripted as a rare reward for exemplary will-power or self-belief — never an indictment of the structural conditions which caused the poverty in the first place — and by ironically adapting the genre, Adiga's text replicates some of its formal antipathy towards types of political identity that are not wholly individualist. Thus in Balram's idiosyncratic analysis of post-liberalisation India, it is not the ruling landlord class, or persistent social and economic inequalities that bear the blame for his situation (these are taken for granted); instead, his anger is more forcibly directed at the mutual support networks through which the families of the poor survive by a mixture of interlocking responsibility and obligation. In the symbolic vocabulary of Adiga's political fable this is the 'Rooster coop', a nationwide system by which families exact a tribute of unrelenting toil from the family members who support them.

Commentators such as the author and critic Amitava Kumar have questioned this aspect of the novel's narrative perspective, suggesting that it sometimes rings false, especially in sections depicting rural north-Indian society. Whereas Adiga's representation of middle-class urban India finds a redeeming note of sympathy in Mr Ashok's occasionally considerate treatment of Balram, the depiction of Balram's own family, especially its women, is unrelentingly negative. Thus, notes Kumar, when Balram returns to his home village of Laxmangarh in the company of Ashok and Pinky, he dispassionately notes the poverty and wretchedness of the place without investing it with any of the emotional significance we would expect of such a homecoming. Kumar argues:

this is at the heart of the book's bad faith. The first-person narration disguises a cynical anthropology. Because his words are addressed to an outsider, the Chinese Premier, [the narrative comprises] little anthropological mini-essays on all matters Indian. It is an "India for Dummies" that proves quite adept at finding the vilest impulse in nearly every human being it represents. I don't only mean every member of a corrupt and venal ruling class, but also of the victim class itself, portrayed in the novel's pages as desperate and brazenly cannibalistic. (Kumar)

Kumar's reading probably takes Balram's distinctive narrative position too much at face value, but it rings true for many of the novel's more heavy-handed passages in which Balram's family is depicted as caring more for their livestock than for other family members. In Adiga's strict refusal to sentimentalise the subaltern, presumably for fear of duplicating a kind of worthy social realism, his novel discounts any kind of redeeming collective agency on the part of the poor. Adiga's striking vision of the dynamics of family obligation, and his caricaturing of the family as a mainstay of containment and social oppression notably echoes feminist warnings against the potential violence of family, and family life, for women. However, in the caricatured world of *The White Tiger*, it is women, as key family members, who enact a form of implacable predatory violence by turning the family into a trap for the men who are born or married into it — a reversal that could be said to compromise Adiga's ironic response to a form of labour which is so often the context for violence against women.

Masters, Servants and Relational Invisibility

These initial criticisms apart, I want to suggest here that the most important and original feature of Adiga's novel is the way it foregrounds issues of social justice through a devastating unmasking of the metanarratives that make domestic service thinkable. In his capacity as a factotum and driver for Mr Ashok and Pinky Madam, Balram's servant-identity is a product of fraught inter-subjective relations and, as some of Adiga's reviewers have noted, plays out a process of subjective struggle reminiscent of the master-slave (or lord-bondsman) dialectic, formulated in G. W. F. Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), referred to here as *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In Hegel's well-known master-slave dialectic (which is part of a broader theorizing of self-consciousness), the individual consciousness comes to know itself, initially, through its relational acknowledgement by another, external consciousness (Hegel 111). For Hegel this leads to a conflict in which the need to attain a pure *being-for-self* precipitates a 'struggle to the death' between self and other. Yet because identity is bound up in a dualistic play of recognition, the self cannot sustain a certainty of its own consciousness if it brings about the other's death; thus the conflict resolves itself into an unequal pairing in which 'one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be true for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman' (115). Although this new dual relation might seem to favour the lord/master as the stronger consciousness, the latter can now never be certain of *being-for-self*, because this selfhood is reflected not in an equal, independent consciousness but in the recognition of an 'enslaved' other. Conversely, the bondsman/slave eventually achieves agency

through a life-affirming understanding that s/he is actually the independent consciousness of the pair, a realization enabled by the slave's sense of singularity, and their productive labour. Yet, Hegel is insistent that to achieve a realisation that the slave exists for itself, the latter must pass through a state of existence in which s/he is inherently fearful and aware of becoming thing-like, an object, in the perception of the lord/master.

The most influential modern reading of the master-slave dialectic can be found in Alexander Kojève's 1930s Paris lectures on *The Phenomenology of Spirit* which shaped continental philosophy for a generation. For Kojève a politicized reading of the master-slave dialectic becomes a way of conceiving the dynamics of historical revolutionary struggle, a process which must end with the eventual self-initiated freedom of the slave. It is Kojève's Hegel that informed the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* and shaped an influential Marxist existentialism in which the desire for recognition (*anerkennung*) propels humans to seek validation and challenge the conditions of their social alienation. Kojève's lectures were equally important for the development of Lacan's psychoanalytic models of the subject, and inform distinctively relational aspects of the latter's thought such as the mirror-stage of infantile cognitive development; perhaps more significantly, Frantz Fanon's construal of the transformative violence of decolonization^{vi} also leads us back to this continental Hegelian tradition. It would be unwise to claim that Adiga's novel is directly influenced in the same way, and Adiga himself has denied any intentional reference to Hegel except indirectly through his reading of Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, yet as one reviewer puts it, a '[Hegelian] dialectic is the spine of the novel: the servant kills the master to achieve his freedom' (Jeffries).

The trope that Adiga reverts to more readily, to convey the relationship between master and servant in *The White Tiger*, is that of invisibility, and in this his work is strongly influenced by Ralph Ellison's canonical 1952 novel *Invisible Man* in which the African-American experience of racism is depicted as a willed blindness on the part of white Americans. Keeping in mind Hegel's emphasis on the subjectively interdependent nature of the identities of lord and bondsman (and recalling Kojève's subsequent emphasis on the motivating need for political recognition) a more apt critical assessment of domestic service is a 'relational invisibility': a form of uncanny partial recognition. As a concept-term, this captures something of the paradoxical nature of domestic service as a hidden or disavowed labour, in which the servant's physical presence is necessary to validate middle-class identity but at the same time the servant is required to be as absent and as self-effacing as possible. However, the relational invisibility of the domestic worker is not just an effect of discretion; it is also a symptom of the way the worker-as-servant is interpellated and their existential status diminished by the servility of domestic labour.

We saw earlier how middle-class employers routinely attempt to contain the liminal and transgressive potentiality of the servant through a careful regulation of proximity and distance (or, in the terms I have been using, visibility and invisibility) but this process is necessarily complicated by the way the employment of domestic workers blurs the boundary between public and private worlds and brings monetary relationships into the sphere of kinship and family obligation. In employing servants directly, middle-class families in India encounter the market in some very immediate ways, and how employers make sense of this encounter is determined by deeply-held cultural ideas about the family in traditional and modern configurations.

Hence, in the Indian context, inter-generational memories about family life often reinforce nostalgic middle-class assumptions about older paternalist 'feudal' forms of employment, redolent of loyalty and patronage, in which the servant or retainer was regarded as one of the family (Ray and Qayum 92). However, the tendency for domestic employment to be construed as a qualified form of kinship is certainly not restricted to India: in research on domestic labour globally, Bridget Anderson points out that servants being 'part of the family' is a phrase that crops up repeatedly in interviews with employers. In fact, consciously or unconsciously, families who employ servants have good reason *not to* treat domestic work as conventional employment but to see it as imbued with associative ties that are 'like family'. Describing domestic service in such a way is advantageous for employers because it suggests a special relationship between master and servant 'beyond the simple bond of employment' and 'weakens the workers'

negotiating position in terms of wages and conditions — any attempt to improve these are seen as an “insult to the family” and evidence of the workers moneygrubbing attitude’ (Anderson 122–3).

A version of this older paternalist discourse of family and domesticity occurs in *The White Tiger* in the landlord’s house in Dhanbad, where Balram is a subordinate servant in a hierarchy of domestics working for ‘the Stork’ and undertakes deferential tasks such as washing his employer’s feet and blow-drying the family’s pet dogs. In contrast, when he becomes Pinky Madam’s and Mr Ashok’s sole servant later, after their move to Gurgaon, Balram’s role is much more fluid (he works in the home but also acts as a chauffeur) and his new status allows him a relatively greater freedom and an experiential stake in the sealed luxury of their air-conditioned family car. However Adiga is keen to show that this new ‘liberal’ work regime does not improve Balram’s working conditions; rather it makes his status problematic and uncanny. In the Dhanbad house, Balram has had to perform a role as an honest deferential country-boy, and has increased his own standing by threatening to expose the false (Hindu) religious identity of one of his co-workers. Conversely, in Gurgaon, Ashok and Pinky’s self-conscious uncertainty about their own identities — as modern, cosmopolitan representatives of the New India^{vii} — is figuratively reproduced in identities forced upon their servant. Thus on Pinky’s birthday Ashok gets Balram to serve them a meal dressed in a red Maharaja’s costume, transforming him into a human version of one of India’s oldest commercial brand-logos of deferential service, the Air India maharaja, a performance in which Balram inhabits an over-ostentatious, slightly theatrical version of his own role. (Of course the other, darker deferential role that Balram’s employers project on him is that of criminal suspect when they frame him for an accident caused by Pinky’s drink-driving.)

In his uneasy relationship with his master and mistress in Buckingham Towers, Balram is more often associated with the older traditional family configuration, and in the white minimalist surroundings of the apartment he becomes a visible, unsophisticated reminder of rural India. Consequently, he is ridiculed by Ashok and Pinky for his lack of cultural capital (he dislikes global European cuisines and cannot pronounce the word ‘pizza’; *WT* 154), and is suddenly made to recognize himself ‘as other’ in their eyes. The distinctive regime of fear implicit in Hegel’s theoretical model of the master–servant connection is writ especially large in Balram’s relationship with Pinky Madam, whose impatience with India and longing to return to the United States expresses itself as an irritation with her servant. In interactions with Pinky Madam, whom he secretly desires, Balram is introduced to himself as a fearful abject figure, the locus of disgust at aspects of his identity that he had not previously noticed, his cheap clothes and paan-stained teeth; when she finds him absent-mindedly scratching his crotch while preparing tea, her anger and palpable disgust transform him into a version of the servant as an agent of contamination.

Yet because he is a visible signifier of everything the new urban India is not, Balram is also praised by Mr Ashok for an assumed cultural integrity and dedication to family that his employer fears has been lost in his own cosmopolitan lifestyle. Although his family comes from Balram’s home village of Laxmangarh, Ashok, as a landlord’s son, has been removed from the village in early childhood because of the threat of Naxalite violence. He thus harbours a false nostalgia for rural life, and misrepresents Balram as the embodiment of an almost Gandhian simplicity. When his marriage breaks down, Ashok’s self-loathing makes him think Balram’s existence is somehow more authentic than his own, motivating him to ask Balram to take him to eat street food at a roadside *daba*, and leading him to praise an assumed piety and a homespun wisdom which Balram readily fabricates for him. In fact far from representing a subaltern authenticity, Balram has secretly been trying on its opposite — the identity of an affluent urbanite — by purchasing a white t-shirt ‘with just one English word on it’ (*WT* 152), the uniform of the new middle class, in order to gain access to the exemplary space of neoliberal India, the shopping mall.

In Ashok’s and Balram’s distorting interactions, Hegel’s model of consciousness reflected unevenly between master (lord) and servant (bondsmen) becomes an even more persuasive critical frame. Integral to the master–servant relationship exposed so meticulously by Adiga is

the sense of inter-subjective and potentially interchangeable nature of the bond between employer and employee, and if we think of him as 'lord' in Hegel's schema, Ashok, as he sees himself reflected in the perception of his servant, is thus 'not certain of being-for self as the truth of himself' (Hegel 117). This claustrophobic cycle of identification and disavowal culminates in Balram's fatal attack on Mr Ashok, and the theft of his money, which can be read as a radical act of upward mobility in which Balram physically takes his employer's place. This final usurpation has been presaged throughout his narrative in points at which Balram change places momentarily with Mr Ashok as driver and driven, or instances in which he notices intimate aspects of Ashok such as his choice of aftershave. In the last instance, this level of cross-identification results in Balram changing his name, so that in the narrative he literally 'becomes' a new corporatized version of 'Ashok Sharma' in his fugitive guise as a businessman in Bangalore.

Violence and Social Justice

We noted in the introduction that the collective political potential of subaltern communities is strangely suppressed in *The White Tiger*. Indeed, figures of political resistance are few and far between in *The White Tiger*, but Adiga introduces a notable exception in the character of the pavement bookseller, a fitting presiding spirit for a novel which sees the world from ground-level, framed by pulp-fictional crime magazines and the caffeinated platitudes of the business self-help genre. It is the pavement book-merchant who assures Balram that there will be some payback for the growing inequality in Indian society, and who whispers to him that the Naxalites will ultimately seek a terrible revenge for the oppression of the poor by the rich (*WT* 208). Driving around Delhi later, Balram falls into a reverie in which the night-time city suddenly becomes pregnant with revolutionary possibility and his narrative enters into a striking, surrealistic dialogue with the city: '*Speak to me of blood on the streets I told Delhi. I will she said*' (*WT* 221).

The bookseller's secret revolutionary hopes are all the more unexpected because they run contrary to the discursive message of the publications he sells. Amongst these are the prurient *Murder Weekly* magazines read by Balram's fellow-drivers, in which rousing crime-narratives of servants who murder their employees are made morally palatable and politically ameliorative by their contained plot lines:

'a billion servants [and readers of *Murder Weekly*] are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses', Balram asserts, but the murderers in *Murder Weekly* are so deranged that 'no reader would want to be like him — and in the end he gets caught by some honest, hardworking police officer (ha!), or goes mad and hangs himself by a bedsheet after writing a sentimental letter to his mother or primary school teacher, or is chased, beaten, bugged, and garrotted by the brother of the woman he has done in' (*WT* 126).

In contrast to this quiescent narrative of retribution and punitive revenge, Balram's own murder narrative is, as we might expect, emptied of a moral framework that preserves the status quo. *The White Tiger's* narrator tells us that unlike the *Murder Weekly* protagonist he is not haunted by the crime he has committed; rather his recurring nightmare is that he did not kill Mr Ashok, that he is still in Delhi, still locked into a hierarchy of suffocating deference, 'still the servant of another man' (*WT* 313).

Balram's unreliable justification for the murder of Mr Ashok is that, compared with the mass violence wielded by political leaders, for which statues are erected outside parliament, his own criminality is negligible. Yet, provocatively, Balram also demands our attention as readers by justifying what he has done as part of the emancipatory possibilities of the new India: 'am I not part of all that is changing this country? Haven't I succeeded in the struggle that every poor man here should be making?' (*WT* 318). The ambiguity of this self-exonerating statement is especially interesting because, devoid of context, it could easily be taken as the rallying cry of a

Naxalite guerrilla, and it is at this point that we realize that in meeting his own death at Balram's hands, Ashok has not, after all, avoided the subaltern violence that his parent tried to protect him from by removing him from Laxmangarh. Thus, even as we recognise his morally-compromised situation, Balram's career, his self-making, has an insurgent energy because it uses the ostensibly progressive dynamic of entrepreneurial neoliberalism to enact a limited (albeit highly self-centred) metonymic gesture of emancipation. Another way of putting this is to argue that Balram's narrative, as it gives an ironic slant to the business self-help genre as the public text of the new India, also privatises the mass energies of India's Maoist revolution, translating its insurgent call for equality into its very opposite, the pervasive atomizing violence and constitutive injustice of neoliberal capitalism.

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ⁱ See 'Sangeeta Richard was paid Rs 30,000, her diary says she was happy: Davyani's sister'. *Deccan Chronicle* (20th December 2013). Web.

ⁱⁱ See Chidanand Rajghatta, 'Diplomatic row: Safe Horizon plays nanny to Sangeeta'. *The Times of India* (11th January 2014).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Ellen Barry and Benjamin Weiser, 'As Indian Diplomat Exits After Arrest, A Culture Clash Lingers'. *The New York Times* (10th January 2014). Web

^{iv} See Craig Murray, 'This CIA agent is no diplomat'. *The Guardian* (28th February 2011). Web.

^v For a further discussion of this type of cosmopolitan authorial positioning see Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, London: Routledge 2001, and Alex Tickell, 'The God of Small Things: Arundhati Roy's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38:1 (2003) 73–89.

^{vi} See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [*Les Damnés de la Terre*], Constance Farrington trans. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1967.

^{vii} For a discussion of the new representation of the Indian family as a purified, self-contained nuclear unit, see Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2007, p. 60.