

The White Tiger (2021): Lower Caste Identity and Character Development

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Abstract

This study is aimed to analyse: (1) the portrayal of lower caste people in India in The White Tiger (2021) movie, and (2) the psychological transformation of the protagonist presented in The White Tiger (2021) movie. The researcher uses the qualitative method to examine the problem. The object of this study is movie The White Tiger (2021). The data used in this study is collected by the researcher through some steps, namely watching and reading, identifying, classifying, and selecting. In order to answer the problem statement and draw a conclusion from this study, the selected data is analyzed by the researcher through some steps, namely displaying, explaining, and interpreting. The approach and theory that the researcher uses to analyze the problem is sociology of literature and psychology of literature. The result of this study shows that (1) the portrayal of lower caste as portrayed by the lower caste characters of The White Tiger (2021) movie are depicted through various occurrences including poor living condition, unfair treatment and bound by traditions (2) the personality change of the protagonist makes him change from a loyal servant to a disloyal servant.

Keywords: *sociology of literature, psychology of literature, The White Tiger*

Introduction

Movie is a reflection of social life, Alwaqaa (2020) stated that literary genres grow from societal atmosphere, processes and occurrences. And that is what caused literature and social contexts are impossible to be separated. Movie usually brings up phenomena that already happened or is happening in the society. Because depending on how the society grows the movies industry will also grow, and the more complex the society is the more variety the story or themes for movies will be. Therefore many movies will adapt to the current atmosphere of the society. Any phenomena in society that is especially worth to get critics and attention could surely be an inspiration for making a movie, be it discrimination or injustice.

Literary Review

Sociology of Literature

According to Alwaqaa (2020), sociology is known as the scientific study of man as a social being at the center of his society. Sociology also examines the social relationships and behaviors of humans, as well as social structures, institutions, and systems. Alwaqaa (2020) also added that by the 19th and 20th centuries as the social sciences advanced, sociology alongside literature also became more specialized and organized field of study. As literary genres became more advanced and have more variations and complexity.

Alwaqaa (2020) stated that literary genres grow from societal atmosphere, processes and occurrences. And that is what caused literature and social contexts are impossible to be separated. The sociology of literature has evolved into a well-established and methodical subject of study whose primary goal is to demonstrate the symbiosis, interconnection, interaction, and subtle complexities that exist between literature and all sociological activities that take place in society.

Meiliana (2019) stated that sociology plays a key role in explaining how each literary work has its roots in a particular social and geographic setting where it can fulfill particular purposes and why value judgments are unnecessary. For this reason, some literary works may flourish in one location but not in another. Various elements like weather, topography, racial background, traditions, and political views influence the caliber and development of specific literary works.

Psychology of Literature

Aras (2014) defined psychology as the science that systematically investigates and attempts to explain observed behavior and its relationship to hidden mental processes that go on inside the organism as well as external events in the environment.

Aras (2014) stated that works of literature acts as the material embodiment of cultural and artistic legacy, offering us the opportunity to examine the origins of human creativity. A wide range of themes and ideas regarding human emotions, behaviors, tensions, worries, motivations, wants, and many other events

are taught in literature. An author, the one who creates the works of literature, represents his life based on their goals, viewpoints, philosophies, and values. Through inspiring readers' feelings and emotions as well as assisting them in understanding the purpose of life, the author allows readers to enter undiscovered and unseen realms.

In the relation of psychology and literature, Aras (2014) stated that there is a strong connection between literature and psychology. Both of them deal with people and their responses, views of the world, suffering, aspirations, anxieties, conflicts, and reconciliations. Similar topics are addressed by both literature and psychology, and both may gain from one another to provide a variety of interpretations and points of view.

Personality Psychology

According to Heatherton (1994) Personality can be used to describe practically every aspect of human existence and experience. Personality psychology is a hugely broad and dispersed field. Heatherton (1994) stated that childhood is where a lot of the factors that influence our personalities to develop, and before we reach adolescence, we develop a large portion of our sense of self and the developmental factors seem to have a stabilizing effect on personality.

Heatherton (1994) also argues that there are several reasons that humans desire some malleability or adaptability in their personality. Heatherton gives examples such as prisoners who are released back to the society after receiving their punishment in hope they already change their criminal ways. When people start psychotherapy or enter rehabilitation programs, they expect to be able to significantly alter significant areas of their lives. Therefore, when a personality trait negatively impacts social interactions, one's mental or physical health, or one's ability to participate in society, we want it to change.

Heatherton (1994) stated that we can assess someone's personality through life narratives or interviewing the said someone. By using these techniques, researchers look at life changes from the perspective of the person being investigated. Since personality is more widely defined in these situations than it is by simple qualities, change is frequently obvious. It is through the person's life

experience that we can see and understand the change that happens in his personality.

Heatherton (1994) explained that there is a way to examine the change in someone's personality by using micronarratives. Micronarratives are autobiographical stories that concentrate on certain occurrences. They stand for the individual's personal assessment of the event in question. The tales in question may not be entirely true because individuals create, retrieve, and alter the stories to suit their own self-concepts, but they do convey what the person thinks is significant. Micronarratives are becoming more and more helpful in the research of motivation for subjects like anger, guilt, ending personal relationships, criminal and antisocial behavior, and other subjects that are challenging to evaluate using traditional laboratory techniques.

India's Caste System

According to Sahgal (2021) caste system in India has existed since about 3,000 years ago. It is a social hierarchy that is carried down via lineages and has the power to determine a person's ability to pursue certain careers and social situations, such as who they can marry. Despite the fact that the caste system was created by Hindus, today, almost all Indians, regardless of their religion, identify with one.

Perez (2004) stated that the caste system is typically described as a hierarchy in which members have inherited occupations and are segregated by laws that limit sexual and dietary interchange to those of the same caste. Social status is based on the ritual complex of purity and impurity, which are qualities assigned to social categories deemed antagonistic and irreducible: the Untouchables, who represent the highest level of impurity, are at the bottom of the system, and Brahman priests, who are ideally the holders of the highest level of purity, are at the top.

Perez (2004) also added that the Untouchables are considered to be the most permanently polluted caste, in contrast to the other castes' temporary organic or ritual impurities. The Untouchables are often accused of impurities because of their unique line of work, which involves frequent and continuous contact with

contaminated materials resulting from the decomposition and death of human, animal, and vegetable matter. Examples of these materials include trash, excreta, cadavers of both humans and animals, animal skins, and bones. Since ancient times, the Untouchables have been restricted from the social and ritual domains of the other castes. This exclusion began with their removal from houses of worship and water collection, and continued with their exclusion from local government bodies like the panchayat and public services like transportation, shops, and schools.

Modern India Discrimination

According to Dovidio (2010) regarding intergroup relations, discrimination carries a negative connotation. It suggests more than just differentiating amongst social objects; it also alludes to treating people unfairly and inappropriately because of their membership in a group. Discrimination can take the form of overtly hostile actions directed at a group member or, more covertly, less supportive reactions than those directed toward an ingroup member under similar conditions.

In accordance to Discrimination in India, Sahgal (2021) stated that nowadays aside from religion-based discrimination, a lot of Indians also received a caste-based discrimination in some parts of India. Modern Indians almost generally classified within a particular caste. People who are born within this caste system are less likely to cross their social life boundaries, which includes their freedom of marrying someone.

In addition, Sahgal (2021) also stated that even though in the country part of India not all Indians felt or experienced being discriminated, caste segregation is still prominent. For instance, a significant portion of Brahmins stated that they would not tolerate having a neighbor who is a member of a Scheduled Caste (another name of the lowest castes), and that is why most Indians claim that most of their close acquaintances are from their own caste.

Aside from being segregated, according to Narula (2001), although in numerous villages, the government provides water pumps, sanitary facilities, and electricity to the upper-caste population, but ignores to provide the same amenities to the nearby, separated Dalit community. Despite being constitutionally

prohibited in 1950, this practice of "untouchability" is still widespread in rural India. These practices include the exploitation of Lower-caste laborers who are assigned to degrading employment based on their caste, leaving them economically and physically vulnerable. Without access to land, decent job or education, the majority of Dalits in India still live in extreme poverty.

Besides poverty, in India, there exists debt bondage and slavery. The insufficient earnings received from manual labor, agricultural work, and other low-caste occupations frequently drives families belonging to lower castes into bondage. An estimated forty million individuals in India—roughly fifteen million of them children—are bonded laborers, forced to work in conditions akin to slavery in order to pay off debts.

According to Narula (2001), since the early 1990s, Dalits in India have received an increase in violence as a result of the development of Dalit rights movements. For example, there had been reported a total of 90,925 cases registered as crimes and atrocities against the Untouchables in the span of two years between 1995 and 1997. Narula (2001) also stated that the true number of abuses is probably far greater because Dalits are frequently hesitant and unable to disclose crimes against them due to the lack of police cooperation.

Research Methodology

The method used for the research in this chapter is the qualitative method, which is applied by the researcher. The research is based on a process that deals with data analysis as well as providing a description and explanation of the subject in relation to the supporting materials. The reason the researcher chooses to use the qualitative method is because according to Creswell (2008), qualitative research can provide a wide explanation for behavior and attitudes, and it may include variables, constructs, and hypotheses.

Creswell (2008) also added that some researchers use qualitative research to study topics like social control, language, stability and change, or social organization. These abilities and benefits of using qualitative as the method of the research is a proof that this method is suitable for this study.

The object of this research is the movie *The White Tiger*, an Indian movie that was released in 2021 with the duration of two hours and seven minutes long. The movie is written and directed by Ramin Bahrani. The researcher uses Netflix as the source of the movie. All the actions of the characters in the movie as well as the movie's subtitle will serve as the research's object.

The researcher follows some procedures to collect the data: watching the movie, reading, identifying the data, classifying the data and selecting the data. After obtaining all the classified data, there are three steps that the researcher used to analyze the data in qualitative research: displaying the data, explaining the data and interpreting the data.

Finding and Discussion

1. Portrayal of Lower Caste

Poor Living Conditions

Balram: "These are the best-fed and most important members of my family. After them, my sly, old Granny, Kusum. She had forced my brother, Kishan, to work in the tea shop. And she took every rupee from my father, a rickshaw puller."
(*The White Tiger*, 2021, 00:04:15)

In the dialogue above, Balram (protagonist) is writing a letter to the Prime Minister of China. This is the very first dialogue that explains how life in his village looks like.

Before continuing to analyzing the dialogue, there are some contexts that need to be understood first. When Balram says "these are the best-fed and most important members of my family" the scene in the movie shows a bunch of buffaloes and goats. The house which Balram's family live in can be seen as dilapidated. The environment around his house is dirty and looked unhealthy. The brother Balram said in the dialogue was still a child. In fact, both Balram and his brother were still children.

After understanding the contexts above, we can conclude that Balram's family is in a state of deprivation. The sentence "she had forced my brother, Kishan, to work in the tea shop" also confirming that there is child labour within the lower caste society. The occupation of the father and the brother are also

hinting that the lower caste people tend to work as low paying workers. The environment where he lives is also what we can call a slum, an unclean environment.

Balram: “The Stork, he was the landlord who ruled our village and collected a third of everything we earned. He fed so much on the village that there was nothing left to feed on. We feared his elder son, the Mongoose, even more. And my father was always in debt to them.”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:07:16)

The scene showed in the movie when Balram said the statements above was the arrival of the Stork and the Mongoose along with their men to Laxmangarh. They came to the village to collect money from the villagers while using violence.

Aside from the violence, the sentence “he fed so much on the village that there was nothing left to feed on” and “and my father was always in debt to them” suggest that the lower caste people are struggling on their economy aspect.

Balram: “The tea shop? I’m supposed to go to Delhi.”

Kishan: “Father didn’t pay the master. Granny said you have to work now.”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:07:58)

In the conversation above, Balram was forced to work at a tea shop together with his brother. Balram seemed confused because before this conversation, he was promised by his teacher that he would get a scholarship to attend a school away from his village, but now that he was forced to work, he could not attend school anymore.

Kishan’s answer in the conversation above “father didn’t pay the master” is suggesting that lower caste people are struggling to make a living. Another statement from Kishan “granny said you have to work now” also indicates that child labour is not an unusual occurrence in the lower caste society. From that point, we can also conclude that many kids in the lower caste society could not receive proper education, assuming that there are many children that have to work since young age like Balram and his brother.

Balram: “By the end of that year, my father was sick with tuberculosis. No politician had built a hospital in Laxmangarh, so we had to travel two days to another village. No doctor ever came.”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:08:50)

In the dialogue above, Balram was desperate to cure his father. He did all he could so his father can survive, he even travelled for two days to another village to get his father treated, but unfortunately, his father passed away after not receiving any treatment.

From the dialogue above, we can see that lower caste people could not receive proper healthcare, simply because there are no infrastructure such as hospitals ever built in their village, not even a doctor. The sentence “no politician had built a hospital in Laxmangarh...” and “no doctor ever came” indicate that lower caste people are neglected by the government.

Unfair Treatment

Instructor : “You’re from a caste of sweet makers. Only a boy from a warrior class can tame a wild stallion. Muslims, Rajputs, Sikhs have aggression in their blood. Why don’t you stick to making sweets?”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:15:29)

The dialogue above took place when Balram was getting his driving lessons with his instructor. The instructor told Balram that people from the caste of sweet makers such as himself is not worthy to drive and only the people from the warrior class are able to drive the car.

The dialogue above shows that the lower caste people are receiving different treatment. The statement “only a boy from a warrior class can tame a wild stallion” showed that in the eyes of the higher caste people, the lower caste people should just do the work that suits their social status, which in this case, making sweets. Lower caste people are deemed unworthy or inappropriate to do the higher caste people’s work.

The Stork : “What do you want?”

Balram : “Sir, with your permission, sir, I want to be a driver for you... or for your son.”

The Stork : “Are you a Muslim?”

Balram : “No, sir. I bathe regularly, keep myself clean, sir, and I’m not lazy.”

Ashok : “Hey, I’m Ashok.”

The Stork : “Hey, don’t do that. You need a driver, let’s take him for a spin.”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:17:33)

In the conversation above, Balram had just arrived at the Stork's residence. In there, Balram met the Stork, and his son Ashok. Balram was trying to get the position as the new driver. Meeting Balram for the first time, Ashok was eager to shake his hand. Seeing his son reaching his hand out to shake hands, the Stork said "hey, don't do that". The Stork blocked Ashok's hand and preventing his son to shake hands with Balram.

The Stork's action shows that in a way, the higher caste people are reluctant to touch the people from the lower caste. Lower caste people seem to be seen as filthy. Balram's answer to the question "are you a Muslim?" which he answered by "...I bathe regularly, keep myself clean, sir..." also indicates that the people from his class are indeed being associated for being filthy. All he asked was just is he a Muslim or not, however Balram answered with a statement that he bathe regularly and keeping himself clean.

Ashok : "Why do you hit the servants? In America they can sue you for that."

The Stork : "This is not America, son. They respect us for that. Remember that."

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:25:48)

The conversation above was the continuation of the previous conversation. After the Mongoose hit Balram on his comment and opinion about the Internet, Ashok asked his father why he hit Balram. Ashok felt it was inappropriate and they can be sued because of that from his experience in America. The Stork lightly answered that they are in India, not America, and that their servant will respect them for it.

The Stork's answer "they respect us for that" shows that the people from the lower caste are looked down upon and underestimated. Higher caste people do not respect them and in their opinion hitting their. This further proves that lower caste people receive physical abuse.

Bound by Traditions

Balram: "I overheard them saying they need a second driver for Mr. Ashok. He's just come back--"

Kusum: "But you don't know how to drive!"

Balram: "I just need 300 rupees for the driving lessons and--"

Kusum: “No! You’ve always been insolent like your father. You’ll stay right here with Kishan.”

Balram: “Granny had married him off, given him two weeks to dip his beak into his wife, and now he was stuck here. I would be too.”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:13:23)

In the conversation above, Balram was trying to convince his Granny to give him money to apply for driving lessons. Balram wanted to become a driver for the landord’s son, Ashok. The Granny was not convinced by Balram’s proposal at first and wanted Balram to stay in the village just like his brother. Hearing the rejection, Balram was concerned that he would end up stuck in the village forever like his brother. Later in the movie, the Granny agreed to give Balram the money he needed with one condition. She told Balram to send money to her every month.

From Kusum’s order to Balram “you’ll stay right here with Kishan” in the conversation above, we can find that people from the lower caste tend to not cross their social border and stay within their social class. Balram’s statement “granny had married him off, given him two weeks to dip his beak into his wife, and now he was stuck here” strengthen the analysis above as well as indicating that lower caste people have less freedom to marry someone.

2. Protagonist’s Personality Change

Balram: “I know communists like you don’t believe in God, sir, but do you believe in fate? That was when I first saw him, the Stork’s youngest son, Mr. Ashok. He had just moved from America back to India, to Dhanbad, where his family had made a fortune in coal. I knew then, this was the master for me.”

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:12:48)

The dialogue above took place in Laxmangarh. While Balram was still working at the tea shop, he saw the Stork’s family visiting his village. There, Balram saw Ashok, the Stork’s youngest son for the first time.

The sentence “I knew then, he was the master for me” shows that like other people from his class, Balram had the urge to become someone’s servant. Balram made the decision to become a servant after he heard some customers while he was working at the tea shop that the Stork’s family needs another driver.

Balram: “The Mongoose must have called his man in Laxmangarh, because two days later when they did hire me, they knew everything about my family. The pride and glory of our nation, the

Indian family. Every master has to know where their servant's family live at all times just in case a servant decides to steal from his employer and run. If so... fair enough. I would do the same. But it's what the masters do to their servants' families. This is how the rooster coop works. This is how it traps so many millions of men and women in India. So rest assured, the Stork and his sons could count on my loyalty."

(The White Tiger, 2021, 00:19:32)

In the dialogue above, Balram was explaining the consequences of becoming a disloyal servant. Balram explained that if a servant ever dares to steal and run away, not only his life, but the life of his family would be in danger. The masters will not hesitate to even kill them if such events ever happen.

We can see from the dialogue above that despite such risks, Balram still decided to become a servant. The sentence "so rest assured, the Stork and his sons could count on my loyalty" also shows Balram's determination to commit himself as a loyal servant.

Balram: "I would not let him tell me... my fate was a shack in a slum. Over the next weeks, I learned the ways drivers cheat their masters. Number one, give your master phony invoices for repairs that are not necessary. Two, sell your master's petrol to other drivers. As you gain confidence, cruise around picking up and dropping off paying customers. Delhi has many pickup points. Over time, you will learn them all. When I looked at that cash, I didn't feel guilt. I felt rage there are only two castes in India. I was growing a belly at last."

(The White Tiger, 2021, 01:28:46)

After having conversation with the man in the garage, Balram started to learn on making more money by cheating his master. He started by giving his master fake invoices for car repairs, selling his gas to another drivers, and picking up and dropping off customers for extra money.

The dialogue above especially the statement "over the next few weeks, I learned the ways drivers cheat their masters" marks the change of Balram's loyalty towards his master. We can assume that Balram was cheating his master because he was afraid if the thing the man in the garage told him would come true.

Balram: "And sometimes I think, even if they did catch me, I'll never say I made a mistake. 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."

(The White Tiger, 2021, 01:59:54)

Until the end of the movie, Balram was never caught of his crime of murdering Ashok (his master). In the dialogue above, Balram stated that it does not matter even if he got caught. He would never say that killing his master was a mistake, and it was all worth it.

The statement “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” in the dialogue above shows that Balram was finally able to free himself from the desires of being a servant.

Conclusion

Based on the findings and the analysis in previous chapter regarding the portrayal of lower caste people in the movie as well as the transformation of the protagonist’s personality in *The White Tiger* (2021) movie, the researcher is able to reach some conclusions. The conclusions are as follow:

The lower caste people in the movie are portrayed as a group of people who live at a slum and living in poverty. They tend to work as low paying workers and there are also indications of child labor. The children of the lower caste society do not receive proper formal education. Lower caste people also portrayed to marry with the people from within their own class and tend to stay in their community for the rest of their life. Infrastructures such as hospitals are not available at the place they are staying, making it difficult for them to receive healthcare. Aside from healthcare, the lower caste people are also not allowed to access public facilities such as police station.

As for the social interactions between lower caste people with the people outside of their social class, the research discovers that lower caste people receive discrimination such as physical abuse. They are reluctant to report crimes that befall them. They receive less cooperation from the law enforcement such as police. The lower caste people also deemed to be unworthy of doing the jobs outside their social class, they also seen as a group of filthy or unclean people.

The research discovers that the protagonist (Balram Halwai) went through some change in his personality. Balram initially had the personality of a loyal

servant. Later in the movie the movie, Balram went through a change in his personality from a loyal to a disloyal servant due to the treatments he received from his masters.

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