

**Educating Silence, Submission and Servitude:
A Study of Culture Industry in *The White Tiger***
Rosemaria Regy Mathew

Abstract

The White Tiger by Aravind Adiga draws a fine portrait of the class conflict in the contemporary Indian society. The paper looks into the presence of culture industry in Balram's narration of his tale. The novel describes how a popular magazine titled *Murder Weekly* and the pornographic films shown in Laxmangarh feed and foster complete obedience and docility of the ignorant masses. The paper argues that such magazines and films constitute a part of the culture industry and critically analyses how these magazines and films are used to keep people silent, submissive and seemingly satisfied thus ensuring their submission to the real holders of power. Such a study reveals how those in power control even the creative sphere to remain in power and to ensure the obedience of the masses.

Keywords: class conflict, culture industry, submissive, magazines, power

The White Tiger

The White Tiger (2008), an impressive literary debut by Aravind Adiga, provides a darkly comic, witty and a shockingly realistic portrayal of modern India. Written in the form of a series of letters, *The White Tiger* is a tale of poverty and misery in the context of globalization and rapid development. By narrating the tale of Balram from poverty to luxury, the novel lays bare the class conflict between the two opposite strata of the society and lends voice to the oppressed section of the society that is either unheeded deliberately or choked under domination. Adiga, in his interview, states that the novel "is not an attack on the country, it's about the greater process of self-examination."

By narrating the tale of the "India of Darkness" (Adiga 14), the novel fiercely attacks and brilliantly critiques the contemporary class divide in the modern-day Indian society. Balram, in his letter to Wen Jiabao, explicitly states, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (Adiga 14). He later says, "These days, there are just two castes: Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies. And only two destinies: eat or get eaten up" (Adiga 64). Thus, *The White Tiger* that narrates Balram's "dark story" (Adiga 9), which he terms as the "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian" (Adiga 10), sheds light on the miserable life of the millions of poor who live in the "India of Darkness" (Adiga 14).

Culture Industry

‘Culture Industry’ is a term coined by the critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the essay titled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). Adorno and Horkheimer were part of the Frankfurt School, a group of German-American theorists who deviated from orthodox Marxism and developed powerful analyses of the changes in Western capitalist societies that ensued the classical theory of Marx. Adorno was associated with the Institute for Social Research which pointed out that social and cultural factors played as important a role as economics in oppression. He was among the first intellectuals to recognize the potential social, political, and economic power of the entertainment industry.

Adorno and Horkheimer proposed that popular culture is similar to a factory that produces standardised cultural goods –films, radio programs, magazines etc. that are used to manipulate mass society into passivity. Consumption of such pleasures of the popular culture make people docile, irrespective of their harsh economic circumstances, and this in turn ensures the continued obedience of the masses to the market interests. Culture industry thus keeps people passively satisfied, politically apathetic and also makes them disinterested in overthrowing the capitalist system. The products created by the culture industry prevent people from questioning the injustice and exploitation around them.

Adorno and Horkheimer in the essay “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” say:

The sociological theory that the loss of the support of objectively established religion, the dissolution of the last remnants of pre-capitalism, together with technological and social differentiation, or specialization, have led to cultural chaos is disproved every day; for culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part....Under monopoly all mass culture is identical.... People at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly.... Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. (1)

Adorno considered culture industry as a strategic integrative mechanism for binding individuals to modern capitalist societies. He drew attention to the fact that the whole world was made to pass through the sieve of the culture industry. The products of culture industry left no room for imagination, reflection or rumination on the part of the audience.

Culture Industry in *The White Tiger*

In *The White Tiger*, there are numerous references to magazines and pornographic films which constitute a part of the culture industry. A magazine titled *Murder Weekly* occurs frequently in the novel. Balram gives a detailed description of the magazine.

“It’s sold in every newsstand in the city, alongside the cheap novels, and it is very popular reading among all the servants of the city- whether they be cooks, children’s maids, or gardeners. Drivers are no different. Every week when this magazine comes out, with s cover image of a woman cowering from her would-be-murderer, some driver has bought the magazine and is passing it around to the other drivers.” (Adiga 125).

Even more striking than the description of the magazine is its cover page and the content it deals with. For instance, an issue of *Murder Weekly* that a driver once gives Balram has “a catchy cover- a woman in her underwear... lying on a bed, cowering from the shadow of a man” (Adiga 124). The magazine most often, deals with murder, love, rape, revenge etc. Such aspects compel people to buy the magazine. Balram once listens to a driver reading aloud the contents of the magazine. “*It was a rainy night. Vishal lay in bed, his breath smelling of liquor, his eyes glancing out of the window. The woman next door had come home, and was about to remove her-*” (Adiga 148). Such “murder and rape magazines” (149) were extremely popular among the drivers. Whenever the drivers are together, they flip through the pages of the *Murder Weekly* “like a bunch of dogs rushing after a bone” (Adiga 126). Moreover the magazine is sold at a very cheap rate, which ensures that all the servants are able to afford it.

The whole point behind the publication of the magazine is simply to keep the servants submissive to their masters. The servants, with their low pay and being victims of exploitation will naturally be filled with anger and frustration. They spend their entire day serving their masters, who in this global village, live in the much adored American style. The task of the drivers’ is to take their masters to shopping malls, five-star hotels, prostitution centers etc. and wait outside. While they do so, they too dream of such as life. This psychological drive for the ‘masterly’ and ‘cultured’ Western lifestyle of the servants is what the editors of the *Murder Weekly* take advantage of. The magazine, to a certain extent, gives them a chance to live their dream life and it also warns them of going against their masters. In the absence of such a magazine, the servants may unite and think of what Marx termed as a proletariat revolution. But, when they read such magazines, they unconsciously convince themselves that it is better for them to remain as servants. Balram explains in his letter to Wen Jiabao:

A billion servants are secretly fantasizing about strangling their bosses- and that’s why the government of India publishes this magazine and sells it on the streets for just four and a half rupees so that the poor can buy it... the murderer in the

magazine is so mentally disturbed and sexually deranged that not one reader want to be like him....so if your driver is busy flicking through the pages of *Murder Weekly*, relax. No danger to you. Quite the contrary.” (Adiga 126)

Hence the publication of the magazine becomes a huge business enterprise and it plays a pivotal role in keeping the servants submissive and silent. The same effect is achieved by the pornographic films shown regularly in Laxmangarh. Balram asks, “What traditional Indian village is complete without its blue-movie theatre...?” (23). Such “two-and-a-half hour fantasies with names like *He Was True Man*, or *We Opened Her Diary*, or *The Uncle Did It*, featuring golden-haired women from America or lonely ladies from Hong Kong” (Adiga 23) are shown every night at Laxmangarh. Through such magazines and films, the “real holders of power” (Adorno and Horkheimer 2) ensure that the servants or the working class remain servile to them. Magazines such as *Murder Weekly* see to it that:

Something is provided for all so that none may escape.... The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality.... Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type. (Adorno and Horkheimer 2)

Hence *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga draws a fine portrait of the class conflict in the contemporary Indian society. A close examination of the novel makes one aware of how culture industry operates in a subtle manner in the modern market-driven globalized society. The tentacles of culture industry penetrate the psyche of the masses, rob them of their imagination and critical rumination thus ensuring their silence and submission to those in power. Thus, through his brilliant and powerful narration of the shocking tale of Balram from rags to riches, Adiga makes his readers aware of the class struggle in the society, the invisible cracks in our vision of progress and also the myriad ways in which power operates and the public are still exploited even without their being aware of it.

Works Cited

- Adiga, Aravind. Interview by Stuart Jeffries. Roars of Anger. *The Guardian*, 16 Oct. 2008. Web. 4 Apr. 2018. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/16/booker-prize>>.
- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009. Print.
- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass

Deception”. N. p. n. d. Web. 5 Apr. 2018.

<<http://faculty.georgetown.edu/irvinem/theory/Adorno-Horkheimer-Culture-Industry.pdf>>

Gauntlett, David. *Theodore Adorno*. N. p. n. d. Web. 1 Apr. 2018.

<<http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-ador.htm>>.

Kellner, Douglas. *The Frankfurt School*. N. p. n. d. Web. 4 Apr. 2018.

<<http://www.pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/fs.htm>>.

Shagufta, Iqra, and Noor-ul-Qamar Qasmi. “Class Stratification in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*.” *The Criterion* 4. 2(2013):n. pag. Web. 4 Apr. 2018. <[www. the criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com) The Criterion An International Journal in English ISSN 0976-8165>.

=====
Rosemaria Regy Mathew
Assistant Professor on Contract
Assumption College, Kerala
bellarose913@gmail.com