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The Self-Made Entrepreneur: Marxist Analysis Of White Tiger

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Abstract

American capitalism and its values have the ability to influence global economies with the rise of the internet and information technology. However, films like *The White Tiger* allow for a more intersectional examination of how people outside the United States are influenced by class issues. The objective of this paper is to critically examine how the proletariat is represented in *The White Tiger* and apply Marxist concepts to identify the hegemonic ideologies created within institutions and culture in India. By using a Marxist analysis of semiotics, I examine the film's animal metaphors and smiling façade, studying the superstructure to paint a bigger picture of how the proletariat can flip roles and reclaim power as the newly formed bourgeoisie. As a result, *The White Tiger* recreates the self-made entrepreneur in a response to the colonial influenced social classification or caste system, while presenting technological advancements and start-ups as a solution that recreates the powerful influence capitalism has in maintaining economic tensions and the proletariat's desire to become the ruling class.

Keywords: White Tiger, Marxism, film analysis, proletariat, class, caste

Marxist Analysis of *The White Tiger*

In the film, *The White Tiger*, the protagonist, Balram Halwai states, “Today, there are two castes: men with big bellies and men with small bellies.” Balram is referencing the class conflict between the proletariat and bourgeoisie that is central to the film (Bahrani, 2019). This paper uses a Marxist analysis of *The White Tiger*, focusing on the economic tensions in India’s society and how a poor Indian man from a small village risks everything to escape from the coop. Applicable theories applied to *The White Tiger* include the determinant element, class conflict, false consciousness, and the state of alienation. Before analyzing the film, this research first defines Marxism and notes other prominent scholars within the field such as Karl Marx, Douglas Kellner, and Henri Lefebvre.

Literature Review

To better understand how Marxism has been applied to the study of film, this paper discusses scholarly articles related to Marxism, class, and caste. An article by Rajapandian et al. (2021) introduced three Tamil-language films that challenged the status quo in their depictions of caste, class, and gender disparities. The films *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Asuran* (2019), and *Karnan* (2021) exposed high discriminatory practices and gave voice to the proletariat members of the Indian society through an anti-caste lens. Although this paper begins the discussion of class conflict, it does not dive deeper into a Marxist analysis for one of the films which would open the discussion even further.

Moving forward, Holt (2010) focused on the class conflict by analyzing Clive Donner’s 1982 Marxist adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. Holt (2010) mentioned the

bourgeoisie, the oppressed class and their exploitation, and the overall theme of a class conflict. The two main characters, Olivier and Fagin, are the hero and villain who are united as “victims of a society obsessed with money and class” (Holt, 2010, p. 261). The film ends with the reaffirmation of bourgeois ideals but acts as a powerful Marxist critique of the novel.

Tang (2011) expanded Marxist criticism by applying it to James Cameron’s major 2009 film *Avatar*, the Hollywood science fiction blockbuster, as well as to the political impact of the film in different areas of the world. Cameron’s pre-*Avatar* films included repeated themes of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat with characters representing both sides in *The Abyss* (1989), *Aliens* (1986), and *Titanic* (1997). In comparison, *Avatar* features class struggle beyond national borders and critiques colonialism and imperialism, taking on an anti-imperialist overtone and critiquing corporate greed.

The potential to analyze films using the Marxist lens is open for much more exploration and expansion. A Marxist examination of the caste system, which “uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places” (Wilkerson, 2020, p. 17) creates more complex conversations about the impacts of capitalism in the modern world. So far, the research on this topic is applicable by focusing on a particular genre of films, and analysis of the proletariat and class conflict, or an overall Marxist theme found within a director’s work. My research extends the Marxist critique by focusing on another modern, non-Western film such as *White Tiger* (2021), which demonstrates the changing views of the caste

system in India by primarily focusing on imagery surrounding the main character's condition.

Method of Analysis

Marxist analysis begins with understanding the two central components: base and superstructure. Berger (2019) summarized Karl Marx, stating that the base is the determinant element, which is the economic system found in a given society. This economic system then influences “the superstructure or institutions and values of a given society” (p. 58). The superstructure is vast and includes the legal system, philosophy, religion, ideas, arts and culture alongside institutions.

The base includes what Karl Marx recognized as the class conflict between the bourgeoisie, “who own the factories and corporations and form the ruling class”, and the proletariat, “the huge mass of workers who are exploited by this ruling class and whose condition becomes increasingly more desperate” (Berger, 2019, p. 65-66). The bourgeoisie create this class conflict by indoctrinating the proletariat with ideologies such as the self-made man and trying to convince them that the social and economic structures are natural and inevitable.

These two components, base and superstructure, show that the ruling class has a significant impact over the mode of production, which affects how our society functions. Marx spoke of the mode of production as the combined forces of human labor, tools, and social participation (Lyon, 2020). To maintain the status quo, the bourgeoisie implement false consciousness and further create alienation which occurs when the individual worker's identity is separated from the work they do and continues forced labor to maintain their needs.

The indoctrination of ideologies from the ruling class by means of manipulation and exploiting the masses is called a false consciousness, or “a consciousness that takes the form of the ideology that dominates their thinking” (Berger, 2019, p. 68). These ideologies include individualism and, as Douglas Kellner described, “ideas that promote globalization, new technologies, and an unrestrained market economy” (as cited in Berger, 2019, p. 62). This is beneficial to the ruling class because the status quo can be maintained while it is difficult for the proletariat to realize they are being exploited. Berger (2019) quoted Marx, explaining that the dominant ideas expressed by the ruling class “possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think”, while the proletariat are influenced by a false consciousness, adding that “[m]ass media and popular culture are centrally important in the spread of false consciousness, in leading people to believe that ‘whatever is, is right’” (p. 61).

Henri Lefebvre, a French Marxist, believed that people living in capitalistic societies are living in a state of “terror” where “violence is always latent, pressure is exerted from all sides on its members, who can only avoid it and shift its weight by a super-human effort; each member is a terrorist because he wants to be in power (if only briefly)...” (as cited in Berger, 2019, p. 67). In other words, the pressure to succeed in a class-stratified society makes individuals the instruments of their own oppression and repression of others.

Alienation from the capitalist economic system is also important to a Marxist analysis, where a stranger in society “has no connections with other” (Berger, 2019, p. 68). While capitalism creates good for many people, it often comes at the expense of others, generating alienation. Like false consciousness, alienation is unconscious, and

people may not recognize that they are alienated. Alienation, as described by Marx, is linked to labor. It occurs because individuals are not fulfilled in their work and are denied access to what it produces, therefore feeling more like themselves during leisure time. Work is external from the worker and not voluntary, which can create a dangerous cycle because the worker's labor belongs to another person and produces things that ultimately do not fulfill their alienated needs. This situation leaves people to feel "separated or estranged from their work, from friends, from themselves and from life," with work becoming a "destructive force" (Berger, 2019, p. 69). The class conflict, false consciousness, living in a state of "terror" and alienation will all be used to examine the individual and Indian society at large in *The White Tiger*.

Description of Text

The White Tiger's narrator and protagonist is Balram Halwai, a son of a rickshaw driver from a poor rural village in Laxmangarh, India. His present-day self, a "self-made entrepreneur", is shown writing a letter to Chinese official Premier Jiabao recounting how he climbed India's social ladder to become a chauffeur and later a successful businessman. He is seen wearing a nice, patterned button up with rings on his fingers, a slick ponytail and combed mustache, and typing on his Apple laptop. His present-day self signifies his newly obtained wealth and upper-class status. The story he tells in his letter to Premier Jiabao begins when a young Balram is forced to drop out of a prestigious school to work when his father is unable to pay off loans to a man in the village named the Stork. He never returns to school because his father later dies of tuberculosis, with no doctor available to treat him. Balram was described as a "White Tiger" by a government official, who granted him a scholarship for his brilliance so he

could attend the school that he then had to leave behind. This phrase uses a metaphor to signify a rare and unique animal who comes once in a generation, like an individual who ultimately escapes from poverty and oppression.

The film's other characters are upper class individuals: the landlord, known as the Stork, who taxes the villagers a third of everything they make; the Stork's elder son, the Mongoose; and Ashok, the Stork's youngest son who recently returned from the U.S. where he was going to school. Pinky Madam, Ashok's wife and a doctor of physical therapy, is an American-born Indian and critical to the film's plot. Balram learns how to drive before becoming the second servant to this family. Ashok and Pinky come off as more empathetic when compared to the rest of the family who use verbal and physical abuse. They both challenge the traditions of India. Ashok sees potential in technology and dreams of creating the "New India", or middle class, and Pinky is an educated woman who despises the way Ashok's family treats Balram.

Balram's main attire as he recounted his life consisted of the same blue-collar button up and black slacks. He massages the Stork's legs, cooks and cleans in the mansion. He often dons a smile which symbolizes servility and obedience while ensuring the family that they are his "family," even though they threaten to kill Balram's real family should he disobey them. To work more closely with Ashok and Pinky who are moving to Delhi, Balram ends up blackmailing the family's number one driver who has worked for the family for 20 years, replacing him when he is fired. Balram then drives Ashok and Pinky to Delhi, as they set out to bribe politicians in order to help the family avoid paying taxes.

Everything changes one night when Balram takes Pinky and Ashok to a club in Delhi. They are both drunk and Pinky takes the wheel instead of Balram. As she drives down the road, she hits and kills a young child. Several days later, the Mongoose and Stork force Balram to read and sign a written confession, stating that he was solely responsible for the hit and run. He is shocked and distressed that he is sacrificing his free will and must accept that they would kill him and his family if he does not. Nothing happens until Pinky gets down on her knees to tell Balram that no one reported the accident and that they do not need his confession anymore, leaving him to deal with this confusion. Balram, who lives in the garage with the other servants and drivers, is later awakened by Pinky, asking him to take her to the airport. She gives him 9300 rupees, equivalent to three months of his salary. He deals with Ashok's verbal abuse and alcoholism and even comforts him now that Pinky's gone, but begins to learn the way to cheat his master during the following weeks.

He learns to create fake invoices for car repairs to receive compensation, sells petroleum to other drivers, and acts as a taxi driver in Delhi during the night to earn extra cash. Eventually, Balram overhears that he might be replaced, so he contemplates stealing the money that Ashok is using to pay off politicians to avoid paying taxes. In the end, he murders Ashok in the night and escapes to Bangalore with the money, knowing that the Stork has probably killed his family back home. In Bangalore, Balram takes Ashok's name and bribes the police with some of the money to arrest taxi companies with expired licenses so that he can create his own taxi start up, White Tiger Drivers.

Analysis

The animal metaphors in *The White Tiger* are significant because they connect to class conflict and alienation. For example, the chicken coop seen on the truck passing by symbolizes the oppression of India's poor, with the chickens as stand ins for individuals who are slaughtered with no way of rebelling or escaping—just as the poor are defeated by the severe inequality in Indian society. The cities are filled with people carrying their salaries on their backs, busy markets in the cities, and unhoused families. Balram does not want to suffer the fate of his father who was constantly indebted to the Stork and Mongoose and the bourgeoisie until he worked himself to death. Instead, Balram identifies as a white tiger, rare and unique in the Indian jungle. The Stork and Mongoose are competitors in the jungle which connects to the broader themes of capitalism and survival of the fittest mentality that is ingrained in the culture. The Shah family (the Stork and his sons) made their fortune from coal and taxing the poor, while Balram spent years breaking coal so the bourgeoisie could drink tea in a shop Balram himself could not afford.

Balram's foil is his brother, who accepted his role in the caste system and married someone in the village. Mohammadi (2021) described the caste system as one [being] born in India with its most important standing, namely belonging to his/her social class, which is theoretically immutable. This tradition applies equally to rural environments, where virtually no one can conceal his origin and to make a living, one has to deal with occupations that have been determined by their classes (p. 4).

In India, it is normal for someone to marry only within their caste which keeps the masses in a state of alienation and false consciousness when the proletariat are convinced that this is how society naturally functions. The false consciousness is maintained in other hegemonic structures mentioned in the film, including Hinduism. Within it is the belief in a caste system, which, with social consent, has remained unchanged from British colonial times. Lull (2016) stated that social consent “implies a willing agreement by people to be governed by principles, rules, and laws they believe operate in their best interests, even though in actual practice they may not” (p. 40). Thus, the proletariat behave like servants and always obey their masters while demanding nothing in return.

At the same time, there is a constant state of terror that Balram experiences throughout the film. There are deadly consequences if a servant steals or runs away from his master, which keeps Balram on his toes and makes him question the decisions he makes. The Mongoose consistently slapped Balram and verbally abused him, questioned his family’s caste background, and used his signed confession as blackmail in case he would need to use it in the future. He is an example of how fear, coercion, and force can be used to control the proletariat.

Balram’s smile symbolizes servility and obedience, and he maintains it most of the time in front of his masters. However, we begin to see it crack when he is described as “half-baked” and disposable by the bourgeoisie. He begins to express violent behavior by himself and actively resists when Balram pushes Ashok away for grabbing at his collar and blaming him for letting Pinky leave, making him fall on the ground in shock. After being told to leave Ashok alone and to not hang around like a fly, Balram’s

smile disappears as he walks away. As he is looking at his reflection in the elevator, he pinches his hand as he forces a smile on his face. He later gains the confidence to go behind the bourgeoisie's back to take advantage of opportunities. He stated, "The desire to be a servant has been bred in me, poured into my blood and hammered into my skull." Now he chooses to master his servility in front of the bourgeoisie and cheat them for more money. Balram kills Ashok, and afterwards, his insatiable laughter is abruptly stopped with a straight face. He overcame his false consciousness and state of "terror" to be liberated outside of the coop.

At the same time there are the signs of technology which signifies the "New India" and techno-capitalism. This is shown by Ashok's earphones when he first visits Balram's village, and later when he speaks with great determination about how "[his family's] driver represents the biggest untapped market in India, waiting to surf the web, buy a cell phone, rise up to the middle class." In contrast, the Old India is the proletariat who is in the dark and without technological advancements that can improve their lives. Huebert (2015) stated that

[i]n Balram's story, though, techno-capitalism also becomes a quasi-spiritual purveyor of self-identity. Balram's relentless desire to achieve success causes him to cling dogmatically to the values of techno-capitalism. The defining features of Balram's techno-capitalist code are: 1) faith in technology, 2) entrepreneurialism, 3) self-interest at the expense of others, and 4) ambition for money and power. (p. 27)

The globalized economy known as neoliberalism is the ideology deeply rooted in *The White Tiger* and implies a solution for the proletariat. Balram's only choice of

freedom is to be a zombie, which Webb and Byrnard (2014) described as someone “who spends all his or her energies in struggling to gain more and more – the perfect consumer, the perfect exemplar of the search for personal advancement through self-interest” (p. 90). Similarly, Walther (2014) analyzed this white tiger economy and Balram’s performance as an animal figure: it is “an embodiment of the predatory power of contemporary Indian and global capitalism which suggests that “the fate of the of the subaltern human being, as wealth and resources are concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, is ultimately to become animalized” (p. 579). The insatiable desire to be in control in a capitalistic society is recreated as Balram transforms himself into “Ashok Sharma,” the new bourgeoisie.

Ideological/Theoretical Significance

In a society devastated by poverty and inequality, the only two ways to become the ruling class in India is through crime or politics. In capitalist societies, the self-made entrepreneur is hailed as someone we must always cheer for and that is exactly what *The White Tiger* recreates. Balram is a poor boy from a small Indian village who is born within the lower caste system, loses his father at a young age to tuberculosis, receives a scholarship to a prestigious school but is forced to drop out to help his family. He ultimately represents the proletariat, but eventually “switches sides” to become the bourgeoisie. The hegemonic influences in Indian society—like political organizations and the Hindu religion—are where the ruling class sets limits for the proletariat. At the same time, the dominant ideological streams of false consciousness keep the proletariat from recognizing that the system is not working in their best interests.

The White Tiger shows that the ruling class is a discriminatory class and dehumanizes those deemed dirty or “Other.” Similarly, in modern entertainment, Hall (2015) described stereotypes shown such as the dependable slave figure who is devoted to “his Master,” or the slave who is “unreliable, unpredictable and undependable – capable of turning nasty or of plotting in a treacherous way, secretive, cunning, cut-throat once his or her Master’s or Mistress’s back is turned...” (pp. 106-107). We see both of these stereotypes at play in Balram’s actions. Comments could also be made about colorism within Indian society and how values such as competition and individualism from English capitalism are prevalent and continue to influence the collectivist Indian society due to India’s “limitless potential” and “emergent global power” after its liberalization in 1991 (Bear et al., 2015, p. 389). Balram represents the proletariat, including his taxi driver workers who demand to be treated with respect and dignity in a capitalist society that creates corruption and feeds them the solution with the other hand. One can hardly maintain their humanity within the hegemonic structures controlled by the ruling class where the proletariat are seen as a commodity market instead of people neglected by the system.

Conclusion

A Marxist analysis of *The White Tiger* reveals how capitalism creates class conflict, inequality, and corruption, which then affect the infrastructure and political landscape in India. *The White Tiger* challenges the assumption that the ruling class cannot be challenged and instead shows that the proletariat have the power to overcome their false consciousness and state of alienation to rebel against the

bourgeoisie and create better outcomes for the masses. Balram represents the proletariat who, like chickens escaping from the coop, wakes from the false consciousness of a self-made entrepreneur in order to create his startup that better fits the needs of the diverse Indian population.

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