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# The Language of Power and Reality - A study of God of Small Things and The White Tiger Vs Select Dalit Writers

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**ABSTRACT:** In India, caste politics has been for centuries a crucial social and political issue. The Dalit people, who are frequently placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, are subjected to systematic oppression and discrimination as a result of the caste system, a hierarchical social framework that divides people into several castes. In order to raise awareness of caste politics in India and the experiences of Dalits, literature has been a key contributor. Through a close reading lens, this essay will examine *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, as well as their significance in addressing caste politics in India. It will also explore how the Dalits are portrayed in both of these novels and the limitations and implications of their representations. While these novels provide a forum for exploring caste oppression and prejudice, the study contends that they nevertheless have limits in their depiction of Dalit lives. To combat misconceptions and create a more realistic and inclusive understanding of the Dalit community, the article highlights the need for more varied and nuanced depiction of Dalit experiences and identities in literature and media. I hope that this study will add to the continuing debate about caste politics and the depiction of Dalit realities in literature and media. We seek to develop a greater knowledge of the complexity and variety of the Dalit community by critically assessing the depiction of Dalit characters in these novels, as well as emphasise the need for more inclusive and varied representation and suppression in literature and media, by critically analysing the portrayal of Dalit characters.

**KEYWORDS:** Caste politics, prejudice, oppression, discrimination, suppression

Kautilya in his "Arthashastra" says;

स्वधर्मो ब्राह्मणस्याध्ययनमध्यापनं यजनं न दानं प्रतिग्रहच्चेति।  
क्षत्रियस्याध्ययनं यजनं दानं शास्माजीवो भूतरक्षणं च।  
वैश्यस्याध्ययनं यजनं दानं कृषिपाशुपाल्ये वारीज्या च।  
शूद्रस्य द्विजातिशुश्रूषा वार्ता कारूकुशीलंवकर्म च।<sup>10</sup>

According to the lines above, Brahmin religion is based on teaching and learning, giving, and receiving donations. The tenets of the Kshatriya religion emphasise taking and giving alms, using weapons to support oneself, and ensuring public safety. Participating in ceremonies, making, and receiving donations, working in agriculture and business are all part of Vaishya faith. In this sense, practising service to others, business, music, and animal husbandry are all part of untouchables' religion. Additionally, according to a legendary belief, the untouchable will be punished by having melted iron poured into their ears if they unintentionally or purposefully pay attention to Brahmin while he recites the Shlokas. Furthermore, touching the high-caste clothing is regarded a defilement of the aristocracy.

"The God of Small Things" is a novel written by Arundhati Roy, published in 1997, which tells the story of the lives of the twin siblings, Estha and Rahel, and their family in the Indian state of Kerala. The novel deals with a variety of themes, including love, loss, betrayal, and the complex caste system in India. *The God of Small Things*, a book by Arundhati Roy, explores the issue of tyranny. As a phrase frequently used in sociological and historical texts,

oppression is typically characterised as one dominant group dominating another marginal group. The issue of oppression has been seen in many different manifestations, including male and female, lower and higher caste, affluent and poor, etc. She highlights caste-based oppression through the character of Velutha, a member of a lower caste group.

In India, the caste system is a strongly ingrained social structure that dictates a person's social rank and prospects depending on their birth. The system is based on Hinduism and separates individuals into four major castes, with Dalits or "untouchables" at the bottom. For decades, the caste system has been a source of discrimination, oppression, and violence against Dalits, and it remains a serious concern in Indian culture today. In "The God of Small Things," Roy examines India's caste structure through the eyes of a certain family and their interactions. The story emphasises the devastation caused by caste-based prejudice as well as the uneven power relations that exist between castes. The tale portrays the violence and injustice that may occur when individuals strive to cross caste barriers via the characters of Ammu and Velutha, who hail from different castes.

"The God of Small Things" makes an important contribution by exploring the interconnections of caste, gender, and class. The story depicts the lives of women and Dalits, who are frequently at the crossroads of many types of prejudice and persecution. The novel also investigates how economic disparities and power imbalances contribute to the perpetuation of caste-based prejudice. As a whole, "The God of Small Things" is an important work on caste politics in India. The story is a potent indictment of the caste system and its catastrophic repercussions on people and society. It emphasises the significance of confronting and eliminating caste-based prejudice, as well as the need for social justice and equality.

In "Righting Wrongs," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak contends:

'Human Rights' is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights; it is also about righting wrongs, about being the dispenser of these rights. The idea of human rights, in other words, may carry within itself the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism - the fittest must shoulder the burden of righting the wrongs of the unfit - and the possibility of alibi.'

Spivak's quotation emphasises two points: (1) Human rights imply the possession, assertion, and distribution of rights; (2) the stronger must right the wrongs of the weaker. At first view, these arguments may appear to be merely restating what most human rights researchers and activists believe to be basic principles of human rights promotion and preservation. These central premises are as follows: (1) rights come with responsibilities; (2) the powerful - often the state - must protect the rights of the less powerful the poor, the discriminated, and the tortured; and (3) the power-ful's claim to protect the less powerful can also be used to dominate them. A deeper examination, though, indicates a different view. It allows the unfit to claim and distribute rights for themselves: they can rectify wrongs for themselves. If possessing or claiming and dispensing rights is a definition of human rights, then the subject of human rights - the holder of human rights - is (or may be) both a claimer and a dispenser of rights. If the subject of human rights is (or may be) both a claimer and a dispenser of rights, the weaker do not have to rely on the stronger to right their wrongs, or be subjugated by the stronger who claim to have their best interests at heart. Instead, the weaker may correct wrongs committed by the stronger on their own. If the poor were to right wrongs, what wrongs would they right, and how would they do so?

"The White Tiger" is a novel by Aravind Adiga, published in 2008, that explores the realities of the caste system in India and the struggles faced by the lower castes to achieve upward mobility in a deeply hierarchical society. Balram Halwai, a poor subaltern, to identify the most grievous evil as the affluent getting richer at the cost of the poor, and to redress this wrong by killing and stealing from his employer, Mr. Ashok. I contend that Halwai's beliefs and actions are guided by a logic in which (1) underdevelopment is the primary source of class inequality, (2) modernization is the means of overcoming underdevelopment and class inequality, and (3) neoliberal globalisation is the unavoidable hegemony that dominates the world. I contend that Halwai's brutal beliefs and acts are just the inevitable conclusion of a world in which underdevelopment, modernization, and neoliberal globalisation coexist.' Halwai, on the other hand, appears to be too enamoured with the seeming benefits of neoliberal globalisation to recognise its consequences or predominance; he may also be too desperately destitute to care or too pragmatically practical to resist. While Adiga has stated in a separate interview that the perspective expressed in the novel is not his, but that of his protagonist, it is unclear from the novel whether the myopia with neoliberal globalisation is likewise Halwai's. It is difficult to tell if Adiga is criticising the plight of subalterns caught in a neoliberal system in general, or whether Adiga accepts neoliberal structures and processes as a questionable and unfortunate, but ultimately necessary, reality. The second

section of the article examines Halwai's ideas and actions in light of the more current perspective that human rights offer an alternate path out of poverty and class disparity. Although killing and stealing are unethical actions that the moral assumptions underlying human rights principles would condemn, Halwai's thoughts and actions may not be as egregious when viewed through the eyes of the poor, who have long suffered the wrongs of underdevelopment and class inequality. From this vantage point, the rationale of murdering and stealing appears to be justifiable, even though the behaviours themselves remain immoral and unlawful. Indeed, when evaluated through the lens of persistent underdevelopment and class disparity, Halwai's rationale and deeds appear to be exactly what inspires human rights approaches to development.

### **The numerous sorts of oppression in The God of Small Things**

"The God of Small Things" by Arundhati Roy is a novel that portrays the lives of characters belonging to different castes and social classes in India. One of the central characters in the book is Velutha, a Dalit (formerly known as "untouchable"), who works as a carpenter for the family of the protagonist, Ammu.

On the one hand, Velutha's portrayal in the novel can be seen as positive in the sense that he is depicted as a hardworking and skilled craftsman who is respected and admired by many characters, including Ammu's children, Rahel and Estha. He is also shown as being kind, empathetic, and selfless, as demonstrated by his willingness to help the family in their time of need.

However, the portrayal of Velutha can also be seen as problematic in several ways. Firstly, his identity as a Dalit is often reduced to a mere plot device that serves to highlight the caste-based discrimination and oppression that exists in Indian society. Velutha's experiences of discrimination and violence are only explored in relation to how they affect the upper-caste characters, rather than being fully fleshed out as part of his own narrative.

Secondly, Velutha is portrayed as being almost too perfect, which can be seen as a form of tokenism that reduces his character to a stereotype. He is presented as an idealised version of a Dalit, who is not only skilled and hardworking but also a kind and empathetic person who is always willing to help others. This one-dimensional portrayal can be seen as problematic because it fails to acknowledge the complexity and diversity of experiences within the Dalit community.

Finally, Velutha's tragic fate can be seen as reinforcing negative stereotypes about Dalits being doomed to suffer and die at the hands of upper-caste oppressors. While it is true that Dalits face significant discrimination and violence in India, it is important to also acknowledge and celebrate their resilience, agency, and resistance in the face of oppression.

In conclusion, while "The God of Small Things" can be seen as a powerful critique of caste-based discrimination and oppression in India, the portrayal of the Dalit character, Velutha, can be seen as problematic in several ways. While his positive qualities are admirable, the one-dimensional and tokenistic portrayal of his character ultimately fails to fully capture the complexity and diversity of experiences within the Dalit community.

### **The concept of the "benevolent oppressor" present in The White Tiger**

"The White Tiger" by Aravind Adiga is a novel that tells the story of Balram Halwai, a poor driver from a small village in India who becomes a successful entrepreneur. The novel deals with themes of poverty, corruption, and social inequality in India, and features several characters from different social classes, including a Dalit driver named Vitoligo.

Vitoligo's portrayal in the novel can be seen as both positive and negative. On the one hand, he is shown to be a skilled and hardworking driver who is respected by Balram for his professionalism and dedication to his job. He is also depicted as a brave and resourceful person who is willing to stand up to his oppressors and fight for his rights.

On the other hand, Vitoligo's identity as a Dalit is often reduced to a stereotype, and he is portrayed as being uneducated and subservient to his upper-caste employers. His experiences of discrimination and oppression are only explored in relation to how they affect Balram, rather than being fully fleshed out as part of his own narrative.

Furthermore, Vitiligo's portrayal can be seen as problematic because it reinforces negative stereotypes about Dalits being helpless victims who are unable to rise above their circumstances. He is never shown as being capable of achieving success or independence on his own, and his only hope for a better life is through Balram's help.

Finally, Vitiligo's tragic fate can be seen as reinforcing the idea that the only way for a Dalit to escape poverty and oppression is through the help of an upper-caste person. This narrative perpetuates the myth of the "benevolent oppressor" and fails to acknowledge the agency and resilience of Dalit individuals.

In conclusion, while "The White Tiger" can be seen as a powerful critique of social inequality and corruption in India, the portrayal of the Dalit character, Vitiligo, can be seen as problematic in several ways. While his positive qualities are admirable, the one-dimensional and stereotypical portrayal of his character ultimately fails to fully capture the complexity and diversity of experiences within the Dalit community.

### **Potential impact of these representations on the perception of Dalit individuals**

The representation of Dalit individuals in literature and media can have a significant impact on the perception of these individuals in society. If these representations are stereotypical, negative, or dehumanising, they can reinforce existing biases and prejudices against Dalits, perpetuating discrimination, and exclusion.

In the case of "The God of Small Things," the novel's portrayal of Dalit characters as complex and multifaceted individuals challenges the dominant narratives that often depict them as one-dimensional and passive victims of oppression. The novel's portrayal of the intersections of caste, gender, and class also highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of Dalit individuals.

On the other hand, the representation of the Dalit character in "The White Tiger" has been criticised for reinforcing negative stereotypes and perpetuating the idea of Dalit individuals as inherently corrupt or criminal. While the novel addresses important issues related to caste-based discrimination and oppression, its portrayal of the Dalit character has been seen as problematic by some readers and critics.

The representation of Dalit individuals in literature and media can have a significant impact on how they are perceived in society. It is essential for representations to be nuanced, complex, and respectful of the individuals they seek to portray. This can help challenge stereotypes and biases, and promote greater understanding and empathy for all individuals, regardless of their caste or social status.

## **II. ABSENCE OF DALIT VOICES**

Relying on non-Dalit perspectives to narrate the Dalit experience can have several implications, both positive and negative. On the one hand, it can provide an opportunity for members of dominant castes to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of Dalit individuals and the realities of caste-based discrimination and oppression.

However, there are also significant drawbacks to relying on non-Dalit perspectives to narrate the Dalit experience. Non-Dalit perspectives may lack the nuances and complexities that come with lived experience, leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the oversimplification of the Dalit experience. Moreover, non-Dalit authors may not have access to or be aware of the cultural and social nuances of the Dalit community, leading to inaccuracies and misrepresentations.

Relying on non-Dalit perspectives can also reinforce the power dynamics inherent in the caste system, where the experiences and voices of Dalit individuals are often silenced or ignored. This reinforces the idea that only those in positions of power can speak for marginalised communities, perpetuating the cycle of oppression and exclusion.

Therefore, while it can be valuable to have non-Dalit perspectives on the Dalit experience, it is essential to also amplify the voices of Dalit individuals themselves and prioritise their perspectives in discussions on caste-based discrimination and oppression. Providing space for Dalit individuals to tell their stories in their own words and using literature and media as a platform for their voices can help challenge stereotypes, promote greater understanding and empathy, and contribute to the larger movement towards social justice and equality in India.

In "The God of Small Things," the representation of Dalit voices is limited and indirect. Although the novel addresses issues related to caste-based discrimination and oppression, the perspectives of Dalit characters are primarily filtered through the perspectives of the main characters, who are members of a higher caste.

The novel features several Dalit characters, including Velutha, an Untouchable carpenter, and his family members. However, their perspectives and experiences are not fully developed, and they are often relegated to the background of the narrative.

For example, Velutha's experiences of discrimination and marginalisation are mostly revealed through the perspectives of the main characters, particularly Rahel and Estha, who are his friends. While the novel portrays Velutha as a complex and multifaceted individual, his voice and agency are limited, and he is ultimately silenced and marginalised in the narrative.

Similarly, the novel also features characters from other marginalised groups, such as the Syrian Christian community, but their perspectives and experiences are also not fully explored. The novel primarily focuses on the experiences of the main characters, who belong to a higher caste and are positioned as the central voices of the narrative.

"The God of Small Things" addresses important issues related to caste-based discrimination and oppression; its representation of Dalit voices is limited and indirect. The novel primarily portrays the experiences of Dalit characters through the perspectives of the dominant caste, which may reinforce existing power dynamics and marginalisation.

In "The White Tiger," there is a limited representation of Dalit voices, and their experiences are primarily portrayed through the perspective of the protagonist, Balram Halwai, who is a member of a lower caste. While Balram's experiences provide valuable insights into the realities of caste-based discrimination and oppression, the novel does not offer direct or extensive representations of Dalit individuals or their voices.

One of the main criticisms of the novel is that it perpetuates the idea of the Dalit community as passive victims of oppression, without giving them agency or a voice. The novel's portrayal of the Dalit driver, who is exploited and oppressed by his upper-caste employer, reinforces this notion. The driver's character is depicted as one-dimensional and stereotypical, and his voice is largely absent from the narrative.

Moreover, the novel's focus on Balram's individual story and his quest for upward mobility often takes precedence over the larger systemic issues of caste-based discrimination and oppression. While the novel highlights the brutal realities of the caste system, it does not delve deep into the social, political, and economic structures that sustain it.

"The White Tiger" is a valuable contribution to the literature addressing caste-based discrimination and oppression in India, its limited representation of Dalit voices is a notable shortcoming. It is essential to amplify the voices of marginalised communities and provide more diverse and nuanced representations in literature and media to challenge stereotypes and promote greater understanding and empathy for all individuals.

### III. VICTIMISATION VS. AGENCY

The portrayal of Dalit characters in literature and media has often been characterised by a focus on victimisation and limited agency. This is evident in both "The God of Small Things" and "The White Tiger," where the Dalit characters are portrayed primarily as victims of caste-based discrimination and oppression, with limited agency to resist or challenge the system.

In "The God of Small Things," the Dalit character Velutha is portrayed as a victim of the caste system, unable to fully express himself or pursue his desires due to the constraints imposed by his low-caste status. Similarly, in "The White Tiger," the Dalit driver is shown as powerless against the oppressive upper-caste employer, unable to challenge or resist the system that exploits and oppresses him.

This focus on victimisation and limited agency can perpetuate the idea that Dalit individuals are passive victims of a system beyond their control, reinforcing the power dynamics inherent in the caste system. It can also lead to the erasure of the agency and resistance that Dalit individuals have historically exhibited in challenging and resisting caste-based discrimination and oppression.

Moreover, this focus on victimisation and limited agency can also result in a lack of diversity in the portrayal of Dalit individuals. It can lead to the perpetuation of a singular narrative of victimhood and oppression, without considering the diversity of experiences and perspectives within the Dalit community.

Therefore, it is crucial to move beyond a singular focus on victimisation and limited agency in the portrayal of Dalit characters. Instead, it is essential to amplify their voices and showcase their agency and resistance in the face of discrimination and oppression. Literature and media can provide a platform for diverse and nuanced representations of Dalit individuals and their experiences, challenging stereotypes and promoting greater understanding and empathy for marginalised communities.

It is essential to showcase the resilience, strength, and resistance within the Dalit community because it challenges the notion that they are passive victims of a system beyond their control. It highlights the agency and the strength that Dalit individuals possess to resist and challenge the oppressive caste system.

The representation of resilience and resistance within the Dalit community can serve as a powerful tool in challenging stereotypes and promoting greater understanding and empathy for marginalised communities. It can counteract the dominant narrative that portrays Dalit individuals as powerless and lacking agency, giving a more accurate and nuanced portrayal of their experiences.

Furthermore, showcasing resilience, strength, and resistance within the Dalit community can inspire and empower members of the community. It can serve as a reminder of their resilience in the face of systemic oppression and can motivate them to continue to resist and challenge the status quo.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that not all Dalit individuals are equally empowered or have the same access to resources or opportunities. It is important to consider the diverse experiences and perspectives within the Dalit community and to recognize the intersecting forms of oppression they face.

Showcasing resilience, strength, and resistance within the Dalit community is crucial in challenging stereotypes and promoting greater understanding and empathy for marginalised communities. It can serve as a powerful tool in empowering and inspiring members of the community to continue to resist and challenge the oppressive caste system.

#### **IV. INTERSECTIONALITY AND DALIT IDENTITY**

In "The God of Small Things," Arundhati Roy explores the intersectional aspects of Dalit identity, highlighting how caste discrimination intersects with gender, class, and regional diversity to create complex and multi-layered experiences of oppression.

Firstly, the novel depicts how gender intersects with Dalit identity, specifically through the character of Ammu, a Dalit woman. Ammu's Dalit status and her gender both intersect to compound her experiences of oppression. As a woman, she is already marginalised in a patriarchal society, and as a Dalit woman, she faces an additional layer of discrimination and oppression.

Secondly, class is another intersectional aspect of Dalit identity explored in the novel. The character of Velutha, a Dalit carpenter, is portrayed as a working-class individual who faces discrimination both based on his caste and his class. He is exploited by the upper-caste characters in the novel and is denied basic human rights such as education and healthcare, further highlighting the intersectional nature of caste-based oppression.

Lastly, regional diversity is another intersectional aspect of Dalit identity explored in the novel. The novel is set in the southern Indian state of Kerala, which has a unique history of caste-based discrimination and violence. The novel portrays the different ways in which Dalit individuals from different regions within Kerala experience discrimination and oppression, highlighting the diversity of experiences within the Dalit community.

The novel highlights the intersectional nature of Dalit identity, emphasising how caste discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression such as gender, class, and regional diversity. It underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing these intersections in understanding the experiences of Dalit individuals and promoting greater empathy and solidarity within and outside the community.

In "The White Tiger," the Dalit driver is portrayed primarily in terms of his caste identity, but there are also intersecting aspects of his identity that shape his experiences and opportunities, including his gender, class, and regional diversity.

Firstly, gender plays a crucial role in the portrayal of the Dalit driver. As a male, he has greater access to opportunities and resources than his female counterparts within the Dalit community. However, his gender also shapes his experiences of powerlessness and vulnerability, particularly in relation to his interactions with his upper-caste employer and her husband. The driver is unable to challenge the authority and dominance of his employer and is subject to their patriarchal power dynamics.

Secondly, class is also an intersecting aspect of the driver's identity. As a low-income individual, he is more vulnerable to exploitation and oppression, which is exacerbated by his caste identity. The driver's lack of economic resources and social capital limit his agency and opportunities to challenge the caste system, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and oppression that he is trapped in.

Finally, regional diversity is also an important factor in the portrayal of the driver. He comes from a rural background and has migrated to the city in search of economic opportunities. This regional identity shapes his experiences and perspectives, as he is often seen as an outsider by the urban elites and experiences discrimination and marginalisation based on his regional identity.

The intersectional aspects of Dalit identity, such as gender, class, and regional diversity, are crucial in understanding the experiences and perspectives of marginalised individuals. While "The White Tiger" primarily focuses on the driver's caste identity, these intersecting aspects of his identity shape his experiences and opportunities, highlighting the complex and multidimensional nature of identity and oppression.

In "The God of Small Things," the intersectional aspects of Dalit identity are explored in a nuanced and layered way. The novel portrays the experiences of a Dalit family, including their gender, class, and regional diversity. The character of Velutha, for example, is not only defined by his caste identity but also his position as a carpenter and a single father. Velutha's gender, class, and family situation shape his experiences and interactions with other characters in the novel, highlighting the complexity and intersectionality of identity.

Similarly, "The White Tiger" also touches on the intersectional aspects of the Dalit driver's identity. The driver's gender and regional identity, for example, are referenced in the novel, albeit not as explicitly as his caste identity. However, the focus on caste identity in the novel overshadows the exploration of other aspects of the driver's identity, limiting the representation of the intersectional aspects of Dalit identity.

Both novels explore the intersectional aspects of Dalit identity to some extent, "The God of Small Things" provides a more nuanced and layered representation of these intersections. The novel portrays the complex and multidimensional nature of identity and oppression, acknowledging the diverse experiences and perspectives within the Dalit community. In contrast, "The White Tiger" primarily focuses on the caste identity of the driver, limiting the exploration of other interesting aspects of his identity.

## V. CONCLUSION

The paper explores the representation of Dalit characters in two novels, "The God of Small Things" and "The White Tiger," and their significance in addressing caste politics in India. The paper argues that while these novels provide a platform for discussing caste oppression and discrimination, they also have limitations in their representation of Dalit experiences.

The paper highlights the limited or indirect representation of Dalit voices in the novels and the potential impact of these representations on the perception of Dalit individuals. It also explores the implications of relying on non-Dalit perspectives to narrate the Dalit experience, particularly the focus on victimisation and limited agency in the portrayal of Dalit characters.

Furthermore, the paper emphasises the importance of showcasing the resilience, strength, and resistance within the Dalit community and exploring the intersectional aspects of Dalit identity, such as gender, class, and regional diversity.





It compares the portrayal of Dalit characters in both novels and assesses the extent to which these intersections are explored and represented in the narratives.

The paper argues that while these novels provide a platform for discussing caste politics in India and the experiences of Dalit individuals, they also have limitations in their representation of the complexities and diversity of the Dalit community. The paper highlights the need for more diverse and nuanced representation of Dalit experiences and identities in literature and media to challenge stereotypes and promote a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the Dalit community.

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