

A Comparative Study of Narrative Voice as Power in *The White Tiger* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract: This paper argues that narrative voice, and not theme alone, is where Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) stage their arguments about poverty and power. Existing scholarship on both novels has documented their treatment of class division, corruption, and historical trauma in rich detail, but has largely treated narration as a transparent window onto these themes rather than as a mechanism of power. Reading Balram Halwai's unbroken confessional monologue alongside Adichie's three-way focalization through Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard, this study shows that Adiga's single rising voice formally reproduces the exclusionary logic of the Rooster Coop it condemns. At the same time, Adichie's plural narration distributes authority more widely, even granting authorship to a former servant, without fully equalizing that authority across gender. Bringing narratological readings of each novel into direct comparison, the paper contends that both texts use the architecture of who speaks to decide questions of poverty and power well before their plots resolve them.

Keywords: narrative voice; focalization; polyphony; postcolonial poverty fiction; power and narration

Introduction

Critics who write about Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* almost always agree on one point: both novels use fiction to expose how poverty is manufactured and maintained by those who hold power. Adiga's Balram Halwai claws his way out of rural servitude in India through cunning and eventually murder, while Adichie's characters in Biafra watch a war strip away wealth, safety, and identity within a few short years. What has received far less attention is how each novel tells its story, not just what each novel says. This paper argues that narrative voice in these two texts is not a neutral container for theme. It is itself an exercise of power. Balram's unbroken first-person confession, addressed to a foreign premier over seven nights, performs the same logic of exclusion that he condemns in India's class system: one voice rises by silencing every other voice around it. Adichie's novel does the opposite. She splits her narration across three focal characters, a servant, an elite woman, and a foreign outsider, and lets a formerly powerless houseboy become an author within the story itself. Reading the two novels side by side shows that questions of poverty and power are answered as much through who gets to narrate as through what gets narrated.

Review of Literature

Scholarship on *The White Tiger* has mostly focused on what the novel shows rather than how it is built. R. Ahlawat reads the book as an attack on the gap between the "India of Light" and the "India of Darkness," arguing that Adiga wants readers to see how the basic needs of people with low incomes are ignored by those in power (Ahlawat 14). J. A. Sebastian makes a similar point, describing the novel as a study of the divide between rich and poor that runs through every institution Balram passes through, from the village tea shop to the Delhi car showroom (Sebastian 233). R. Renuka Narasiman and Vinita Singh Chawdhry likewise frame the novel around injustice and poverty, tracing how Balram's family is trapped by debt and landlordism long before he ever picks up a knife (Narasiman and Chawdhry 231). Krishna Singh goes further and calls Balram the voice of the underclass, arguing that Adiga uses him to speak for the millions who are usually spoken about rather than spoken to (Singh 101). A. S. Mahato extends this line of criticism by tying Balram's rise to the wider forces of globalization, arguing that the novel dramatizes how economic liberalization opened new paths upward for a few while leaving the old hierarchies of caste and servitude largely intact for everyone else (Mahato 29). These readings are convincing, and they explain why the novel matters as social criticism. But they treat Balram's voice mostly as a window onto Indian poverty, a transparent surface through which the reader sees social conditions, rather than as a structure that does its own political work.

A similar pattern shows up in scholarship on *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Abdou Sene reads the novel through a socialist and humanist lens, arguing that Adichie criticizes the Nigerian upper class for its arrogance while showing sympathy for the servants and villagers caught up in the war (Sene 188). Amy S. Rushton situates the novel within a wider set of Biafran war narratives and warns that Adichie's account risks exoticizing suffering for an international audience even as it tries to correct the historical record

left by earlier, mostly male, accounts of the conflict (Rushton 182). R. Vidhya focuses on how the war exposes and worsens existing gender and class hierarchies, following characters such as Olanna and Kainene as their private wealth becomes meaningless against hunger and displacement (Vidhya 2517). Here again, poverty and power are treated as content to be extracted from the novel rather than as effects produced by its telling. What is missing from both sets of scholarship is a sustained account of how narrative voice itself, the choice of one confessing narrator against three shifting focal points, shapes what readers are allowed to know about who suffers and who controls the story of that suffering.

A smaller group of critics has looked more closely at technique. Jitendra Kumar Mishra and Madhur Kumar describe *The White Tiger* as building its satire through a confessional, dramatic monologue style, in which Balram addresses his story to the Chinese premier and never allows another character to answer back in his own words (Mishra and Kumar 286). On the Adichie side, Aghogho Akpome examines what she calls the focalization and polyvocality of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, showing how the novel moves between Ugwu, Olanna, and Richard to avoid settling on a single authoritative version of the war (Akpome 28). M. Ganapathy extends this argument by calling the novel's structure polyphonic, a term she borrows to describe how Adichie resists any one character's claim to represent the whole nation in crisis (Ganapathy 92). Emmanuel Mzomera Ngwira looks specifically at the embedded book that Ugwu writes within the novel, arguing that Adichie uses this device to hand authorship to a character who begins the story as property rather than a person (Ngwira 45). These studies come close to the argument this paper wants to make, but each one stays within a single novel. None of them sets Adiga's monologic voice against Adichie's plural one to ask what the difference tells us about how poverty and power get narrated in postcolonial fiction from the same decade. That comparison is the gap this paper addresses.

Balram Halwai and the Monologic Voice of Ascent

The White Tiger frames its entire plot as a letter. Balram writes to the Chinese premier over seven nights, explaining how he escaped what he calls the Rooster Coop. This arrangement keeps India's poor from ever imagining they could rebel against their enslavers. Balram describes that system in blunt terms: "No secret police. That's because we have the coop" (qtd. in Mishra and Kumar 287). The line captures the central irony of the novel. India needs no visible force to keep its poor in place because people with low incomes keep themselves in place, out of fear for their families and out of a quiet belief that their position is natural. Balram breaks that pattern, but the manner of his breaking matters as much as the fact of it. He does not organize with other drivers, and he does not build any shared resistance. He murders his employer, steals the money meant for a bribe, and reinvents himself alone in Bangalore. His narration mirrors this solitary escape. Balram never lets another character speak for more than a line or two before folding their words back into his own commentary. Every other person in the novel, his family, the girl he hopes to marry, his fellow servants, is filtered entirely through his memory and his judgment of them. Krishna Singh observes that Adiga gives voice to the underclass through Balram precisely by taking narrative control away from

everyone else in that same underclass, so that the poor gain a spokesperson but lose a chorus (Singh 103). The confession that condemns a system built around a single winner is delivered in a voice that permits only a single teller. Adiga does not simply describe the Rooster Coop from the outside. He builds a narrating structure that behaves like one from the inside.

Polyphony and the War Economy in *Half of a Yellow Sun*

Half of a Yellow Sun works in the opposite direction. The novel is told in the third person. Still, it moves between the perspectives of Ugwu, a village boy who becomes a houseboy and later a conscripted soldier, Olanna, a wealthy and educated woman, and Richard, an English writer in love with Olanna's twin sister. No single character controls what the reader is allowed to see. Akpome argues that this shifting focalization keeps the novel from settling into any one version of Biafran history, forcing readers to hold together perspectives that would not normally share the same page: the colonizer's descendant, the educated elite, and the rural poor (Akpome 30). Ganapathy makes a related point when she describes the novel as resisting the idea that any single narrator, elite or otherwise, can speak for the whole nation in crisis (Ganapathy 94). The clearest example of this redistribution of narrative power is Ugwu himself. He begins the novel uncertain even of his own place in Odenigbo's household, and early on Odenigbo hands him books with a warning about how knowledge is filtered by power: "There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land" (qtd. in Jayapal 429). By the end of the novel, Ugwu has become an author in his own right, writing a manuscript called *The World Was Silent When We Died* about the very war that once made him powerless. Ngwira reads this embedded text as Adichie's way of handing authorship to the character who had the least authority at the start of the novel, turning a servant into a witness whose account carries as much weight as any historian's (Ngwira 47). Where Adiga concentrates narrative power in a single rising voice, Adichie disperses it, letting a character from the bottom of the social order end the novel holding the pen.

The Limits of Polyphony: Gender and Narrating Authority

This distribution of voice is not perfectly equal, and recent scholarship has noticed the limits of Adichie's polyphony. B. Harry and Vijayakumar M. point out that even though Olanna and Kainene receive rich interior lives within the novel's focalized sections, it is Ugwu, a man, who is given authorship of the embedded book that frames the entire war for future readers (Harry and Vijayakumar 2506). The women in the novel live through the same history and suffer some of its worst violence, including sexual assault, but the act of writing that history down inside the story belongs to a male character (Harry and Vijayakumar 2510). This detail complicates any simple claim that Adichie's structure is fully democratic. The novel spreads narrative authority across class and colonial position, from servant to elite to outsider, but it stops short of spreading that authority evenly across gender. Michael Coffey's reading of the novel as political allegory supports this point, noting that Adichie is careful about which characters are allowed to interpret the war's larger meaning for the reader, even while she refuses to let any single one of them dominate the plot outright (Coffey 71). Read together, these critics suggest that narrative voice in *Half of a Yellow Sun* is plural but

not fully open, a structure that widens who can speak without fully closing the gap between who speaks and who is spoken for.

It is worth pausing on why this gendered limit matters for a study of power specifically. Olanna and Kainene are wealthy, and within the class logic of the novel they sit closer to power than Ugwu does at the start of the story. Yet the novel's own narrating hierarchy, the layer above the three focalizers where an embedded book gets written and preserved, still passes them over in favor of a man who began as a servant. This suggests that Adichie's redistribution of voice runs along more than one axis at once. Class privilege does not guarantee narrating privilege, since Ugwu ends up authoring the historical record instead of Olanna or Kainene, but gender still shapes who is trusted with that final authorial role even after class barriers are crossed. Vidhya's discussion of how the war strips away the protections that money and education once offered Olanna supports this reading, since her wealth cannot secure her safety any more than it secures her a place as the war's official chronicler (Vidhya 2516). Power in this novel is therefore narrated as something that shifts hands under pressure. Still, it does not shift hands evenly, and Adichie's form is honest enough to preserve that unevenness rather than smoothing it over for the sake of a tidy ending.

Comparative Discussion

Placing the two novels beside each other clarifies what each formal choice accomplishes, and it also clarifies why so much existing scholarship, useful as it is, has not made this comparison before. Critics working on Adiga tend to read within a South Asian frame, comparing *The White Tiger* to other Indian English novels about servitude and caste. In contrast, critics working on Adichie tend to read within an African and Biafran frame, comparing *Half of a Yellow Sun* to other war narratives from Nigeria. Both frames are reasonable, but they keep the two novels from being placed side by side on the specific question of who is allowed to narrate poverty and violence. *The White Tiger* tells a story about escaping poverty through a narrating voice that allows escape for exactly one person and mimics the very system it condemns. Balram's monologue is compelling because it refuses to share space with any other account. That refusal is the formal echo of the Rooster Coop itself, a system in which one winner requires many losers. *Half of a Yellow Sun* tells a story about surviving a war economy through a narrating structure that spreads authority across servant, elite, and outsider, and even hands the closing word to a character who started the novel as property. That structure argues, at the level of form and not only theme, that poverty and violence cannot be understood from a single vantage point, only from several incomplete ones held together. Yet as Harry and Vijayakumar show, Adichie's plural structure carries its own limit along lines of gender, which means that neither novel offers a narrating arrangement that is fully just. Adiga's single voice is at least honest about its own exclusions, since it never pretends to include anyone else. Adichie's multiple voices claim a wider inclusiveness that, on closer reading, still leaves some characters without full authority to narrate their own suffering. What both novels share is a recognition that narrative voice is where power is decided first, before any character earns money, escapes a coop, or survives a war. Existing criticism on both texts, focused heavily on

class, corruption, and historical trauma, has largely treated this formal dimension as background rather than as argument. Bringing Mishra and Kumar's reading of confessional monologue into direct conversation with Akpome, Ganapathy, and Ngwira's readings of focalization and polyvocality shows that these two celebrated postcolonial novels are, in part, arguments about who gets to tell the story of people with low incomes.

Conclusion

The White Tiger and *Half of a Yellow Sun* are usually read as companion pieces in postcolonial poverty fiction because both expose corruption, class division, and the human cost of unequal power. That reading is accurate, but it stops short of asking how each novel's chosen form of narration participates in the very inequalities it depicts. Balram's unbroken confessional voice performs the logic of individual ascent at the expense of everyone else's story. In contrast, Adichie's shifting focalization performs a more collective, though still uneven, distribution of narrating power. Comparing the two novels on this basis opens a path for further work on narrative voice across postcolonial fiction more broadly, particularly on novels published in the same decade that pair economic individualism in South Asia with collective historical trauma in West Africa. Scholars have documented in rich detail what these novels say about poverty and power. What remains to be studied more fully is how the sentence-by-sentence architecture of who speaks, and who is allowed to answer, quietly decides the same questions long before the plot resolves them.

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