

The White Tiger as a Memory Narrative

Dr. Bappa Adhikari^{1*}

^{1*}Assistant Professor. Department of English, Brahmavart P. G. College, Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Email: bappabhu90@gmail.com

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ARTICLE INFO ABSTRACT

This paper tries to examine Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* as a memory narrative drawing on Paul Ricoeur's theory of mimesis and Astrid Erll's rhetoric of collective memory. It argues that literature serves as a medium for reconstructing cultural memory and identity, revealing alternative perspectives often excluded from dominant narratives. *The White Tiger* has already been analysed from various perspectives, including subaltern studies, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies. What this paper tries to delineate is to study the very text as the fiction of memory: memory is not only a subjective phenomenon, it depends upon the social framework, as Maurice Halbwachs points out in his theory of *mémoire collective*, that individual or collective memory relies upon the social framework for both formation and recollection of memory. The protagonist's journey from the backwards northern regions of India, or, in his words, darkness, and moral slavery to success or light and freedom illustrates the selective process of memory, where personal and collective histories intertwine. Through the lens of Paul Ricoeur's mimesis theory—encompassing prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration—this article attempts to highlight how the protagonist's recollections challenge the sanitized portrayal of contemporary India. By employing the antagonistic mode of memory propagated by Astrid Erll, the narrative critiques socio-political realities, exposing the complexities of identity formation within a stratified society. Ultimately, this paper aims to present that *The White Tiger* serves as a successful alternative narrative, retrieving censored memories and identities, and ultimately offering a voice to the marginalised, while questioning the hegemonic narratives that shape collective understanding.

Keywords: memory narrative, mimesis, collective memory, identity, subaltern studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies

Introduction: Memory in Literature

The act of remembering or memory is an integral part of literature. Various branches of mimetic art forms demonstrate that the core theme narrated is indeed an act of remembrance, and that is how they construct or produce a completely different/alternative perspective on memory, history, and identity. Literature, like other modes of representation of culture and society, such as historiography, rituals, customs, and oral tradition, is also the representative of memory; it not only stores the cultural components of memory and history, but also produces or re-(de) constructs such constituents. Through this process of configuration, it re-creates an altogether different perspective of the past and identity as well. Literary texts are concerned with the mnemonic characteristic of the past and its influences on the present. Through this process of (re)evaluation of the past within the context of the present, it opens up various avenues to perceive the past. The selection of mnemonic elements of the past within the context of the text is very exclusive, it can be termed as encoding, each and every mode of remembering, such as historiography, religion, film, photography and oral narration has a unique way of encoding and biases or current loci or location from where the act of remembering has been performing. The encoded objects are consolidated through the process of narration, in the process of narration or remembering, the constituents of mnemonic events or objects are aligned within a formative and normative structure of the text. The meaning that has been retrieved from this consolidation has a distinct purpose that is determined by the current context from which the reminiscence is performed.

The of reminiscing or the memory narrative is very selective process from the vast socio-cultural events, objects, persons from the past, this process of memory narration is exclusive as Ernst Cassirer points out that it is a “creative and constructive process. It is not enough to pick up isolated data of our past experience; we must really re-collect them, and assemble them into a focus of thought” (qtd. In Erll 145). Theorizing the

convergence between literature and mnemonic objects, Astrid Erll highlights “three central intersections between literature and memory. These are, first, ‘condensation’, which is important for the creation and transmission of ideas about the past; second, ‘narration’ as a ubiquitous structure for creating meaning; and, third, the use of ‘genres’ as culturally available formats to represent past events and experience’ (Erll 145). The process of condensation involves various heterogeneous ideas, emotions, images and events being compressed or fused into a composite one through literary mechanisms such as metaphor, allegory, symbolism, allusion and intertextuality. Cultural memory depends on the process of narration, which justifies the process of recollection, as Astrid Erll mentions in her book, *Memory in Literature*:

In analyzing literary works, proponents of structuralist narratology make a fundamental distinction between the paradigmatic aspect of the selection of narrative elements and the syntagmatic aspects of their combination.

(Erll 146)

The literature is the location where the dominant genre of that period constitutes or expresses the zeitgeist or the spirit of the age, and these genres, which are in vogue, exhibit the historical imagination of that particular period of time.

Method:

The analysis of *The White Tiger* as a memory narrative has been followed by Paul Ricoeur’s theory of ‘mimesis’ in his book, *Time and Narrative* and Astrid Erll’s theory of ‘rhetorics of memory fiction’. The relation between literature and memory has been introduced previously. This section of the article deals with the specific methods used to decipher *The White Tiger* as a memory narrative.

Paul Ricoeur, in his book, *Time and Narrative*, tries to provide a model of how literature projects the past or cultural memory and locates identity within the present context through his model of mimesis: mimesis₁, mimesis₂ and mimesis₃. According to Ricoeur, mimesis refers to “whatever innovative force of poetic composition... may be, the composition of the plot is grounded in a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaning structures, its meaningful resources, and its temporal character” (Ricoeur 54). Mimesis₁ is the process of refiguration of the plot, in this process, heterogeneous mnemonic objects, events, and resources are aligned into a single text. It is a paradigmatic model in which the selection of mnemonic objects and events constitutes the three distinct dimensions- material, social and mental. Mimesis₂, in Ricoeur’s words, is the concrete process by which the textual configuration mediates between the prefiguration of the practical field and its refiguration through the reception of the work” (55). The mimesis₂ is the syntagmatic model in which the various mnemonic objects, recollected in the mimesis₁ or prefiguration process, have undergone a transformation process in which these objects or events are organised in a completely different way to generate a new meaning or new text. The transition from mimesis₂ to mimesis₃ is the act of reading of the text, as Ricoeur points out that mimesis₃ “marks the insurrection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader (qtd. in Erll 155). The act of reading changes the perspective of reality.

Another important method is extensively used in reading the text, *The White Tiger*, as a memory narrative, is Astrid Erll’s method of “rhetoric of collective memory”. In her words, “the rhetoric of collective memory as an ensemble of narrative forms which provokes the naturalization of a literary text a medium of memory” (Erll 157). The different modes of remembering are closely linked with different modes of narrations or reproductions. While analyzing the various modes of representation, she distinguishes four prominent modes: experimental mode, mythicizing mode, antagonistic mode and reflexive mode. In reading this text, the antagonistic mode has been brought into consideration.

Antagonistic mode refers to those kinds of literary forms that provide an alternative version of the past and counter the existing one. This kind of literature represents ‘identity-groups and their various pasts (Erll 159). The memories and events are presented through the perspective of a particular group, discarding or silencing alternative versions of the past. In this, *The White Tiger* presents a subaltern perspective to the new India.

Discussion

The White Tiger is an epistolary novel; in this type of novel, “the narrative is conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters” (Abrams 254). The narration of *The White Tiger* is performed through the unexchanged letters of the protagonist to the Chinese Premier, who is about to visit Bangalore to understand the exponential growth of Indian entrepreneurship, and in this pursuit, he intends to meet and listen to their stories. The protagonist wants to write to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao, after listening to the news that Wen Jiabao is about to visit Bangalore and desires to have an interaction with the entrepreneurs to understand their stories. He writes a series of formal and informal letters to the Chinese Premier to share his story of becoming an entrepreneur. Perspicuously he states that “Indian entrepreneur has to be straight and crooked, mocking and believing, shy and sincere, at the same time” (Adiga 9), and to imply that successful entrepreneurs are often self-made men lacking formal education and fancy degrees from abroad, he mentions that they are “made from half-baked clay” (11).

As it has been already mentioned in the method section, the text, *The White Tiger* has been attempted to analyze through the prisms of Paul Ricoeur’s theory of mimesis: mimesis₁, the prefiguration of the mnemonic

objects, mimesis² the configuration of the prefigured variables into a singular form through a particular media, and mimesis³, refiguration of the meaning which has been generated in the configuration process. In his attempt to narrate his “autobiography of a half-baked Indian” (10), he recollects events from the “social dimension” (Erll153), various institutions, communities, apparatus, and social frameworks, while providing the disclaimers of life story:

Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness (Adiga 14)

The paradigmatic selection of mnemonic events and objects, ranging from social milieu to various institutions such as school, police, religion and family, portrays an alternative narrative to the official narrative presented to the world. Collective memory has two distinct antipodal characters- essentialism and presentism- in Olick’s words: essentialism projects “that memory and images of the past are to be understood as expressions of historical reality-become-social structure”, and presentism “assumes that memory and images of the past are produced in the present for present purposes and hence are indices not of anything that happened in the past and its effect on the present but of the structure of interests needs of the present” (Olick 8). Maurice Halbwachs differentiates the collective memory from history in terms of relevance to the present. He distinguishes the alternatively use terms- autobiographical memory, historical memory, history and collective memory: autobiographical memory is the memory of those events that we experience, historical memory is the memory that we access through historical record, history refers to the past with which we do not have any organic relation and finally, collective memory is the active past that forms our identities. Thus, collective memory, as Halbwachs indicates, has two aspects- socially framed individual memories and their social group-specific retrieval or representation. Here in this text, the protagonist retrieves his past to magnify his achievement and locate his identity as *The White Tiger*, the rarest of rare species in the feline family.

The reminiscing of the social milieu, where he nurtured or formed his idea about self and the nature of society, begins with a note of satire of the grand narrative:

I am proud to inform you that Laxmangarh is your typical Indian village paradise, adequately supplied with electricity, running water, and that children of village raised on nutritious diet...

Ha!

Electric poles- defunct.

Water tap- broken.

Children – too lean and short for their age, and with oversized heads from which vivid eyes shine, like guilt conscience of the government of India. (Adiga 19-20)

Ricoeur, while discussing the relation between memory and history, emphasises the importance of hermeneutic analysis of individual testimonies to “overcome the well-rehearsed impasses and aporias” (Kenny 205) in the grand historical narration. The epistemic position, Ricoeur suggests, implies that history is also a narration (Mise en intrigue) based on facts; in this regard, historiography is also a kind of mnemonic practice which (re)constructs the past and identity diachronically. In the memory narrative, the protagonist, engaging in remembering as an anamnesis process, a process of remembrance, has “specificity of the temporalising function of memory” (Kenny 204). His recollection of his journey from darkness to successful entrepreneurship in Bangalore has the temporal urgency to justify his success story and locate his identity as *The White Tiger*, diachronically. In this pursuit, he recollects various variables from voluntary or involuntary affiliation to multiple groups. The social milieu has been presented through his recollection of rural parts of northern India, the semi-feudal social structure within the dysfunctional democratic system, infected with caste based misogyny, rampant corruption and spiralling violence. The dark humorous presentation of the feudal lords through animal allegory-“the Buffalo, owner of the roads, the stork, owner of the river, the wild Boar, owner of all the good agricultural land, and the Raven, owner of the worst land”(Adiga 26)- implies the jungle raj within the democratic set-up. These landlords own all the resources and even impose private taxes to avail themselves. The mass exodus from this part of Indian to the metropolitan cities has become a reality due to dehumanised conditions.

Family is an essential institution from where one develops his identity, as far as his memory of his family members recollects, the death of his mother, and the reaction of the matriarch and others, creates chasm between him and the rest of his family members: it is perhaps for the first time, as far as his recollection concerned, he starts individuating himself from the family. The influence of his father seems very impactful in his identity formation, as he reminisces his words: my whole life, I have been treated like a donkey. All I want is that one son of mine- at least one should live like a man” (Adiga 30). The crumbling education system is another important reference in his narration. The education system in this part of India does not even meet the rudimentary aspects prescribed by the government of India; instead, it can be called a mockery of the education system, as he satirically narrates, “if Indian village is a paradise, then the school is a paradise within it” (32). The corruption within the education system is rampant. The mid-day meal budget is stolen by the school teacher, the free uniforms for the school students are sold to purloin the schoolmaster’s pending six months’ salary. Education cultivates awareness, and awareness fosters education in society, but here the reality is quite gloomy:

No one blamed the schoolteacher for doing this. You can’t expect a man in a dung heap to smell sweet. Everyone in the village knew that he would have done the same in his position. Some were even proud of him, for having got away with so cleanly. (33)

The rise of India from the colonial slumber to a vibrant yet struggling democracy has been commodified to project before the world its brighter sides/ practices, but, at the same time, inherently default social evils creeping into democratic space have intentionally been censored, silenced or archived from the official narrative. This projected narrative of India or its success story has been constantly accentuated through various medias, this active remembering of the narrow selection of events, objects and narratives comes at the cost of passive neglect or disregard or active censorship of the other narratives, that may present an altogether different narrative. This archaivization- whether passively or actively- of Indian story has been revealed through the protagonist's memoir or his unpublished letters to Chinese Premier, as he mentions in his interaction to the Chinese Premier:

Now, Mr- Premier, the little-take-home pamphlet that you will be given by the Prime Minister will no doubt contain a very large section on the splendour democracy in India- the awe-inspiring spectacle of one billion people casting their votes to determine their own future, in complete freedom of franchise, and so on and so forth.(95)

But the reality he has witnessed is quite different: the democratic practices such as casting vote has been turned into mockery, the shady parliamentarians, with criminal records, the nexus between feudal lords and parliamentarians, rampant corruption, and hardly visible any accountability are actually taken as the normal political affairs, as the protagonist recalls in spite of convicted of murder remaining fugitive all these years, his plebiscite right to vote has been casted regularly:

The police knew exactly where to find me. They will find me dutifully voting on election day at the voting booth in the school compound in Laxmangarh in Gaya District, as I have done in every general, state, and local election since I turned eighteen. (102)

In this retrospective narration, the chronological order of events has been intentionally dissolved to highlight the subjective experience of various temporal levels. His journey from the village to Dhanbad, Delhi and finally Bangalore or the light, has vividly demonstrated his thirst to rise from his doomed social status or condition to live like a man, as his father wished for him. In his narration of his journey from darkness to his success, the turning point of his life was the realization of his doomed or damned social condition as a child labour at local tea shop, driver cum servant cum chauffeur cum cook, and his irresistible desire to be a successful, independent, and a man, and his moral struggle to break the mental chain which keeps him in this loop have poignantly been represented through the rooster coop allusion. Once he mockingly mentions that the greatest contribution of Indian society is the rooster coop: "the greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster coop"(173). The rooster coop is a system where the poor people are interpellated to remain as slaves or to serve where they are now for a thousand years due to the fear of annihilation of the family members. His recollection of his moral dilemma before committing the murder of his master, Ashok, is his moral struggle to break the rooster coop at the cost of his family members.

The intertextual reference is an important aspect of the fiction of memory, as Jan and Alideda Assmann refer to the concept of cultural text as the source of cultural memory, which is the process of mnemonic storage and transmission. The constant reference to the popular pulp magazine, *Murder Weekly*, which contains the stories of rape, murder, amorous revenge saga; it has been very popular among the artisan and drivers, servants class in Delhi, but the subscribers or readers of this pulp fiction hardly dare to imitate these stories in their real lives, most of the protagonists and the plots quite similar to theirs, due to the rooster coop. Another important intertextual reference, Dostoevsky's *Raskolnikov* in *Crime and Punishment*, has been exhibited while presenting protagonist's mental dilemma before committing the murder of his employer. Various references to popular Hindi cinemas, songs and pornographic movies help to comprehend the milieu of the events.

Identity

The sole purpose of this homodiegetic narrative- the narrating or remembering self is also the remembered one – does not only provide a candid purview of how the 'half-baked' man, gradually breaking the rooster coop, becomes a successful entrepreneur, through the Odysseus journey from the heart of darkness to the light and success, but also locate his identity as *The White Tiger*, the thinking man, diachronically. The demarcation between various memory fields is always overlapping, and the transition from one memory framework to another creates tensions. This is also proportionately applicable to the relation between memory and identity. Identity or identities are always concomitant with one's affiliation to the various social and political groups. It possesses or generates a myriad of identities, and finally, the identity that the narration or the recollection intends to justify in lieu of the present situation emerges as the dominant one. Here, in this case, the protagonist projects how the half-baked Indian from the heart of darkness becomes a successful entrepreneur. The protagonist possesses various identities, as it has been clear through his narration, in accordance with the relation to various socio-political and religious groups, communities etc. his journey from backward rural north India to a successful entrepreneur at Bangalore presents various identities such as Munna at home, Balram Halwai at school, actually the name is given to him by the school teacher, *The White Tiger*, the name is given to him by the school inspector witnessing the potential talent in him, which he embraces as his true

identity, driver number two at Dhanbad, driver cum servant cum cook at Delhi, a murderer, a breaker of the rooster coop, and a successful entrepreneur at Bangalore.

Through memory narration, he attempts to justify himself, his heinous crime, and, most importantly, his identity as *The White Tiger*, the rarest of rare tiger breeds, or the successful entrepreneur. Due to the poor family background, he did not complete his formal education, but his hunger for knowledge and his thirst for success or desire for a better life never died, as he recollects:

... I used my time at the tea shop in Laxmangarh to spy on every customer at every table, and overhear everything they said. I decided that this was how I would keep my going forward ... (52)

His desire for knowledge, his inquisitive nature, and his constant seeking of opportunities to rise above his social status, in this pursuit, he seems quite a Machiavellian hero, for whom morality is the invisible trap that keeps him enslaved. At the end of narration or confession, he wishes to seek redemption by establishing a school for the poor children who will be taught only practical lessons of life. Thus, his narration not only incorporates or presents how he became a successful entrepreneur, but also ties to justify his crime.

Conclusion

The fiction of memory has three distinct ways to generate cultural memory: the very literary text as a medium of remembrance, the text itself as an object of remembrance, and the literary text as the mimesis of memory. *The White Tiger*, as a memory narrative, presents an alternative perspective on Indian society, which is often excluded from the official narrative. This memory narrative serves as a medium to locate the aporias within the metanarrative, allowing the gaps within the narration to be presented. In this regard, Bright Neumann points out that “such novels imitate that meaningful memories do not exist prior to the process of remembering and narrating the past” (Neumann 338), memory narrative indulges in the process of reinterpretation of the past and pluralizes the remembered events through temporalization of the current location from the “pragmatic” remembrance is happening. In *The White Tiger*, the process of narrating the exponential growth of entrepreneurship in India presents an alternative, subjective narrative of the past, which provides glimpses of glitches or gaps in the official narration, and thus, it valorises the amnesia of the official narration of the censored past. And finally, by providing a voice to those who have been silenced in that narrative, it not only enriches the official perspective but also challenges the hegemony of the official perspective.

Paul Ricoeur distinguishes two types of memory- *mémé*, active remembering, which heavily depends upon the current situation or location of the narrator and anamnesis, spontaneous remembering without any demands of the present locatedness. The fiction of memory narrative is an active act of remembering, and this process of remembering has the urgency of the present time, in this regard, *The White Tiger*, as a memory narrative, the protagonist is reminiscing to narrate how the entrepreneur has been made from the “half-baked” or ill-educated people, who has dared to break the traditional social convention, which has been projected through the rooster coop allusion. In the process, he also justifies or discovers his identity as *The White Tiger*, the rarest of animals, which comes only once in a generation. The homodiegetic narration of the fiction of memory, where the remembered and remembering selves are the same, as in *The White Tiger*, poses the challenges of these selves and the discrepancies between experienced and narrating selves at the multi-temporal levels of the past and present can only dissolve through a harmonious singular purpose at the present. The success of such a narrative lies in the meaningful synthesis of various contradictory elements of both past and present. In this sense, *The White Tiger*, as a homodiegetic narrative, successfully presents the mnemonic events with a symphonic harmony of the present needs – the struggle of a successful entrepreneur, and stabilises his identity. Another important aspect of the memory narrative is the “bringing together things remembered and things tabooed and testing the memory- culture relevance of commonly marginalized versions of memory” (Neumann 339), by doing so, it provides voices or perspective to the subalterns to assert their own stories and gracefully retrieve their identities. *The White Tiger* presents an alternative perspective or narration of India, and the aporias or gaps in the grand narrative can possibly be overcome through critical trust of individual testimonies such as *The White Tiger*.

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