

The Functioning of Gaze in Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

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Abstract

Gaze is a powerful theory with wide spread impact in various fields. The application of gaze theory to literary works can be revelatory at multiple levels. The basic structure of the plot, the real nature of the narrative and the psyche of characters get more clarity due to the application of gaze. This research paper applies gaze theory to the debut novel of Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*. Balram Halwai, the primary protagonist of the novel struggles to uplift himself in life. Gaze plays a major role in the journey of Balram from his oppressed, downtrodden state to a successful entrepreneur. Identifying the significant gaze and the way it functions to help Balram in his journey are the objectives of this paper.

Key Words: Gaze, journey, desire, light India, dark India

The power of gaze is generally accepted and acknowledged by people around the world. Gaze is studied by scholars and researchers belonging to the field of psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies and economics. It is a theory that is equally significant in both science and social sciences. Literature too makes use of it in literary creation and literary analysis. Gaze theory has the capacity to give newer, deeper interpretations to literary texts. It helps the readers in character study by giving a new scope for analysis.

Literature has been using the power of gaze in its creative works from time immemorial. The application of gaze theory in the recent years has helped the readers to understand creative works better. Jennifer Reinhardt points out to the growing prominence and awareness of gaze by reasoning out that, "These early versions of gaze contain none of the analytical implications that the word now evokes in contemporary criticism... A

possible explanation lies in the growing awareness/concern in the twentieth century with the implications of the gaze and its role in understanding the functions of art" (www.chicagoschoolofmediastudies.com). Literature uses both verbal and non-verbal cues to communicate its meaning and message. Words are often the primary elements that move the story forward and help the readers understand the plot and narrative. But, the non-verbal cues reveal the real intent and meaning and hence, the real plot. Body language is an essential part of non-verbal communication. Gaze is the most powerful element of body language. John Berger, who has used the concepts of gaze to analyse the European oil paintings, writes about the power of gaze in his remarkable work, *Ways of Seeing*. He says, "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding

world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it” (Berger 7). The simple movement of the eye can communicate volumes of information. Though gaze literally means an intense look, gaze theory includes all the movements of the eyes, the absence of movement and the closed eyes. The physical eye too acts as signifier of gaze. Whatever eyes do and whatever they refuse to do come under the purview of gaze.

Having its origin in Jacques Lacan’s Mirror Stage, gaze has come a long way in social sciences. Lacan identifies the mirror as playing the role of subject, as it reciprocates the gaze by reflecting and giving back the gaze. When a child looks at the mirror for the first time and realizes that he/she is seeing his/her own self, the consciousness of having a body occurs. The child understands that he/she is also a body, an object, like all others. So, the mirror serves to objectify the child. In the duality of subject and object that inevitably arise with any discussion on gaze, the mirror, though it does not have a gaze of its own, is able to become the subject as it objectifies. Laura Mulvey, a feminist film critic, further explains the significance of this gaze in her “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”. She writes, “The mirror-moment predates language for the child...it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the “I” of subjectivity” (Mulvey 807).

The subject – object binary makes the social relevance of gaze clear. The subject is always a powerful person. His gaze is

powerful, domineering, evokes fear and brings in obedience. The source of the power may be economic, political, religious, filial or sexual. The source of power will have a direct impact on the nature of the subject’s gaze. Berger calls it ‘the promise of power’ (45). This promised power is manifest through gaze which further gives him his ‘social presence’ (Berger 45). Berger writes, “If the promise is large and credible his presence is striking. If it is small or incredible, he is found to have little presence. The promised power may be moral, physical, temperamental, economic, social, sexual – but its object is always exterior to the man” (Berger 45). Thus, in analyzing a literary text, it becomes necessary to identify the subject and object positions of gaze and the reasons operating behind those positions.

An analysis of a literary text using gaze theory will naturally be a complex one. The complexity arises because of the minute analysis that the theory demands. A literary text like the novel offers a wide canvass. A minute analysis will be voluminous. In addition, the nature of gaze is complex. Gaze functions directly in many ways and through its representations in even complex ways. In addition, gaze also functions through absence, averted look and lowered eyes. Each of this function has its own meaning and significance.

It is the scope of this paper to identify the functioning of gaze in Aravind Adiga’s award winning, debut novel, *The White Tiger* (TWT). A contemporary work of fiction, *The White Tiger* reveals the economic and socio-cultural divide prevalent in India. The journey of Balram Halwai across this uncrossable abyss of

discrimination forms the basic plot. By tracing the functioning of gaze, this article proposes to reveal the real, inner, psychic journey that Balram undergoes to overpower all his conditioning, to empower himself and to survive in the new world.

The White Tiger is an epistolary novel which has used gaze effectively. Balram, the protagonist, writes a letter to Mr. Jiabao, the Premier of China. The epistolary form enables crisp, direct expression to certain ideas which would have otherwise taken many pages. The presence and functioning of gaze acts as a catalyst. The entire story revolves around the idea of there being two distinct divide based on economy, social hierarchy and custom in India. Balram explains this clearly saying, "India is two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness" (TWT 14). The unique nature of the plot lies in characterizing both these Indias and showing the readers how Balram crosses over from the dark India to light India.

Gaze is present in its myriad forms and functions in different ways throughout *The White Tiger*. Balram Halwai belongs to a lower caste in the dark India. He could not raise his gaze and look at the land lords, the people of light India and the upper castes. So, he hardly has the social sanction to use his gaze directly. He is always the object of others' gaze. But there are a few incidents in which he uses his gaze and they are powerful and life changing. Though the plot revolves around gaze and there are innumerable instances where gaze illuminates the plot and character, due to spatial concerns, the childhood gaze of Balram Halwai, its effect on his life and role in his journey

from darkness to light India are alone taken as the primary premises for analysis in this article.

As a child Balram gazes at the black fort. He has a fascination for it. The author does not clarify whether the fascination is for the fort itself or for the view from the top. The significance of this powerful gaze is hard to understand but Balram's words give the readers a hint of the significance. He says, commenting about the police's investigation in Laxmangarh after he murdered Mr. Ashok, "Yet I bet you they missed the most important clue of all which was right in front of them. I am talking of the Black Fort, of course" (TWT 40).

Understanding Balram's fascination with the black fort and the significance of his gaze at it holds the necessary key to understanding his crime and success. The black fort is a powerful symbol which represents the unreachable for Balram. As a child, he could not reach the black fort. He has tried many times but had hardly had the courage to complete his ascend. The hindrances in reaching the fort are also many. Balram's description of the place shows his gaze and his realization of the many hardships surrounding the fort.

At sunrise, the pond around the base of the fort glows. Boulders from the walls of the fort have rolled down the hill and tumbled into the pond where they lie, moist and half submerged in the muddy water, like the snoozing hippopotamuses... Lotuses and lilies float all over the pond, the water sparkles like silver (TWT 22).

Balram wants to see the top of the black fort. He requests his granny to take him

there but she refuses. Balram explains his situation, "I begged Kusum many times to take me to the top of the hill, and through the entrance way, and into the fort. But she said I was a coward... so I could only watch... I wanted to go up there too" (TWT 40). Balram tries to swim across the pond and climb the black fort but every time fear drives him back. He describes one such incident as, "When I was may be thirteen I decided to go up to the fort on my own. I waded into the pond, got to the other side, and climbed up the hill; just as I was on the verge of going in, a black thing materialized in the entrance way. I spun around and ran back down the hill, too frightened even to cry" (TWT 41). Further, he narrates, "I tried many more times, yet I was such a coward that each time I tried to go up, I lost my nerve and came back" (TWT 41).

Balram fears the black fort. His fear does not make him turn his gaze away from the fort, rather, it makes him gaze at it more. The more he gazes at it, the more is his desire to conquer it. His gaze shows the unbreakable will power in his heart. He uses fear as the catalyst towards success. His gaze does not turn away from the object causing fear, as it is natural for people to avoid looking at objects they fear, if it does not pose an immediate challenge. But Balram is different by nature. Adiga repeatedly stresses on his many differences from his fellow beings. Balram succeeds in moving across the socio-economic divide prominent in India. This is a proof of his difference. He takes what he fears as a challenge to be mastered. It becomes a persistent desire. The black fort symbolizes his first victory towards conquering his fear. He describe his victory as,

Putting my foot on the wall, I looked down on the village from there... It looked like the most beautiful sight on earth. I leaned out from the edge of the fort in the direction of my village and then I did something too disgusting to describe to you. Well, actually, I *Spat*. Again and again. And then, whistling and humming, I went back down the hill. Eight months later, I slit Mr. Ashok's throat (TWT 41 - 42)

There is a strong connection between Balram's action of spitting from the black fort and his slitting of Mr. Ashok's throat. The unconquerable, fearsome object of his life was the black fort. Once he was able to conquer it, it loses its awe-inspiring nature and evokes only disgust in him. The connecting thread between Adiga's various comments on the mind and thoughts of the people of dark India and Balram's life becomes visible through this incident. It is not that the people of dark India could not cross over to the lighter side but they would not do it because of the way their mind is conditioned. To even consider the option of crossing over, one needs to raise their gaze and look at the other side and desire to be like that. This desire is often absent. Adiga uses the rooster coop as a powerful symbol to explain this mentality. He even comments on the servile mentality through Balram Halwai's words, "The way I had rushed to press Mr. Ashok's feet, the moment I saw them, even though he hadn't asked me to!...Why? Because the desire to be a servant had been bred into me: hammered into my skull, nail after nail, and poured into my blood..." (TWT 193). Conquering this mentality is the first step required in Balram's journey towards light India.

Conquering his fear of the black fort gives him the confidence that he could also conquer his slavish mentality.

Balram's effort at conquering his slavish mentality begins from another powerful childhood gaze. This childhood gaze procures him a powerful role model in the future and assures him that the crossing over from dark India to light India is indeed possible. The powerful gaze that motivates him, triggers his desire and assures him is his gaze at Vijay. In the beginning, it is Vijay's khaki uniform of a bus conductor that attracts Balram. His shining silver whistle and his assured monthly income in the form of a pay check are other factors. Balram is fascinated by Vijay and wants to become a professional like him. Instead of deciding to be like the men in his family, he decides to become like Vijay. Adiga reveals his fascination at Vijay by writing, "What it meant to live like a man was a mystery. I thought it meant being like Vijay, the bus conductor" (TWT 30). Adiga further describes Balram's gaze at Vijay, "...his bus-company-issue khaki uniform, his silver whistle and the red cord from which it hung down from his pocket. Everything about him said: he had made it in life" (TWT 31). Balram's desire is revealed in the following words, "I wanted to be like Vijay with a uniform, a pay cheque... and people looking at me with eyes that said, *How important he looks*" (TWT 31).

Balram achieves all these objectives. He feels happy and proud when he becomes a driver for the landlord's car and drives it with the landlord's son and daughter-in-law to his village. Adiga expresses Balram's feelings as, "Going home! And in my uniform, driving the Stork's car, chatting up his son and daughter - in - law!

I was ready to fall at his feet and kiss them!" (TWT 79). But this achievement soon loses its glory. It is not enough for him. Vijay who attracted his gaze and kindled his desire kept moving up in life. As Vijay raises high so does Balram's desire. His persistent gaze on Vijay proves his continuous fascination for him. Adiga writes, "That was the thing about Vijay; each time you saw him he had done better for himself" (TWT 99). At this point in the story, Vijay had already resigned his job, he no longer has any uniform. He merely wears a red band on his head to show that he is a supporter of the Great Socialist.

Vijay makes a giant leap to light India. His success in crossing over to light India is signified by the white uniform of an Indian politician that he wears. To reach this point, he had to indulge in reckless acts. His readiness to act is shown by Adiga. This readiness is being observed by Balram who always gazes at Vijay. "Vijay hit him and the policeman stamped on his face and then Vijay did it again... but they kept stamping on him, until he had been stamped back into the earth"(TWT 102). It is through such acts of violence that Vijay reaches light India. Balram does not blame Vijay for his recklessness. Rather, he feels that Vijay had only done what had to be done. His fascination does not change. His gaze is again a proof of it. Adiga narrates, "Then one day a familiar face turned up at the gate. Vijay, the bus conductor from Laxmangarh. My childhood hero had a new uniform this time. He was dressed all in white and wore a white Nehru cap on his head and had rings of solid gold on eight of his fingers... I waited by the gate and watched" (TWT 103).

Vijay succeeds in retaining Balram's gaze throughout the various phases of his life, as he moved from an innocent bus conductor to a reckless political aid, a successful politician and finally a rich businessman. Vijay's indirect influence is seen in Balram's act of murdering Mr. Ashok. The striking similarity of the violent acts cannot fail to shock the readers. Adiga describes, "I rammed the bottle down. The glass ate his bone. I rammed it three times into the crown of his skull, smashing through to his brains" (TWT 284). Ironically, Vijay, without his knowledge, acts both as an inspiration and instrument for the final act of murder. Balram gets a chance to see Vijay the day before murdering Mr. Ashok. This final meeting, where Balram gazes at Vijay and listens to his every word, is the catalyst that makes the murder possible. Adiga writes, "The man on the right was my childhood hero Vijay... He had changed uniforms again: now he was wearing the polished suit and tie of a modern Indian business man" (TWT 270). It is during this encounter that Balram comes to know about Mr. Ashok's deal of paying seven lakh rupees. He also learns the bright prospects of Bangalore. Incidentally, it is the empty bottle of the Johnnie Walkers Black which they drink in the car which Balram uses to kill Mr. Ashok.

Balram learns from his gaze. He learns from Vijay through his gaze. He is an obedient servant with the servile mentality ingrained in him in the beginning. He learns to conquer this mentality. He learns to aspire. He learns to yearn for more and more. The black fort symbolizes this yearning. Vijay is his role model. Like Vijay, Balram secures a khaki uniform and a pay check but yearns for more. He could

not think of harming his master. Yet, he tries to inculcate the recklessness of Vijay into his mind. He tries to establish a parallel mindset with Mr. Ashok to feel like his equal. He tries to mimic him in every way possible. He tries to dress like him, goes to places where Mr. Ashok goes, drinks the same liquor and chooses the same type of girls. To make all this possible, he spends his entire earnings. He stops sending money to his village and resists their pressure. By copying Mr. Ashok, he tries to become like him physically and mentally. It is his way of shedding his servile attitude. In terms of gaze, it is the object's effort to raise his gaze at the subject. After achieving that end, he tries to become the master by evaluating Mr. Ashok and belittling his actions. He censures all his public and personal deeds. This makes him feel like the master, a superior who is entitled to punish the erring servant. Thus, the crime becomes possible in the form of a punishment for Ashok's immoral and corrupt practices. The subject – object dynamics of gaze gets effectively reversed. This achievement of Balram using gaze is difficult yet absolutely possible. Sartre speaks about this possibility in *Being and Nothingness*. He analyses the look of the subject and the other, the object. He writes,

If the concept of the Other-as-object is to have any meaning, this can be only as the result of the conversion and degradation of that original relation. In a word, my apprehension of the Other in the world as probably being a man refers to my permanent possibility of being-seen-by-him; that is, to the permanent possibility that a subject who sees me may be

substituted for the object seen by me. “Being-seen-by-the-Other” is the truth of “seeing-the-Other (Sartre 281).

After the crime, Balram becomes an entrepreneur in Bangalore and resides safely in light India as it’s most respected and indispensable member. He too has a suit and a business like Vijay. The journey from darkness to lightness has been successfully achieved.

Balram’s gaze as a child at the black fort and at Vijay shows both his inner mettle and desire. He uses the black fort as a vetting stone to strengthen his inner mettle.

It stands as a symbol of the test of his will. He proves his strength by conquering his fear of it. It gives him the confidence to begin the journey. Balram’s gaze at Vijay signifies the persistence in him. It shows him a way by giving him a role model. It also gives him confidence that the journey from darkness to lightness is possible. Thus, it is obvious that gaze has a very prominent role to play in Adiga’s *The White Tiger*. Gaze functions at multiple, complex levels in the story. It serves as the primary tool through which the protagonist Balram Halwai conquers the disadvantages of his life and becomes a success.

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