

Recurrent animal imageries: Connecting Paradigm in *The White Tiger* and life force in the poetic world of AK Ramanujan

Dr. Sonu Lohat

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. College, Bhiwani, Sirsa, Haryana, India

Abstract

In terms of literary excellence Aravind Adiga and A K Ramanujan share a great deal as both the writers have unchecked obsession with animals and the animal world. The animals of different types and shapes, dreadful as well as friendly species, in the novel of the former and poems of the latter are set to cause the sense of disgust, gloom, death, certain analogies, vitality and even celebration. Snakes, disgusting and nauseating fish at dinner plate, red bony chicken like human flesh, young pigs in slum, tamed mysterious buffaloes, white tiger, gecko, alligators, insects such as wasps and other amphibians--crawl, move and figure in the literary world of both the writers. The concept of animal omnipresence in the vast scheme of their literary craftsmanship has been artistically and symbolically deployed as the connecting force within the structure of the poetry and the narrative. As literary tools these recurrent animal images, their references and allusions serve the purpose of rendering seam and common thread to the texture of *The White Tiger*; while in case of Ramanujan they constitute the archetypal and mythical poetic base for the proper expression of his nostalgia, fear, and other predicaments.

Keywords: adiga, animals, literary, poetic, tools, images, allusion

Introduction

Although a literary writer picks a slice of life from a particular society to bring forth its typical facets coloured with certain artistic tools, yet it is his special aesthetics to reach at universal levels through that particular that makes it a true literary work. Hence, in order to achieve this universality such writer artistically uses certain basic images, objects, myths archetypes etc. which are easily and, of course, universally identifiable by all, irrespective to any culture or region. As Jungian propounding goes, such archetypes are universally shared at unconscious level and often they relate to certain life forces which are basics and essence of life. Thus animal and animal culture truly represent the essential blood and flesh of life since human is basically an animal first. The following words of Handy and Westbrook in context with Jungian archetypes hold key to this basic view of human life, "A philosophy that denies the wild and non-rational variety of man and his gods, the Archetypal Critic believes, has lost touch with reality." (Handy & Westbrook, 1974: 102) [3] Aravind Adiga in *The White Tiger* (2008) has artistically but strictly followed this philosophy of archetypal wild and that is why this novel has attained the heights of universality. This is a brilliantly crafted novel in the form of six letters which the protagonist Balram Halwai, the mouthpieces of Aravind Adiga and the narrator, writes to the Chinese Premier laying bare the realistic account of the dark land called India. Applying his artistic insight Adiga discerns certain segregationist dualities which characterize present day India. He projects rather two worlds viz. darker India--- the hinterland, away from the coastal enlightenment, and the light India having the vastness of sea; two classes of human animals living in this jungle viz. bellied, the ruling class and the non-bellied, the ruled ones, the poor working class.

In fact, this novel is a panorama of Indian dystopic jungle where in only socially and economically powerful animals

would thrive in conformity with the jungle law of *might is right*. In this post-colonial chaotic society, as the novel symbolically projects, motley animals and beasts hunt and bully the weaker ones and the perennial cycle of exploitation and injustice goes on though in more sophisticated form. Discerning the irony in this social system Adiga satirically refers ancient Indian society as a systematic zoo wherein order had prevailed owing the strong cultural discipline based on the division of work:

See, this country (India), in its days of greatness, when it was the richest nation on earth, was like a zoo. A clean, well-kept, orderly zoo. Everyone in his place, everyone happy. Goldsmiths here. Cowherds here. Landlords here. The man called a Halwai made sweets. The man called a cowherd tended cows. (WT, 2008: 63)

The social scene of the village Laxmangarh, the native place of the protagonist Balram which serves as the microcosm of typical Indian darkness, reveals the ugly but real facet of India as there does not prevail democratic ways but the influence and rule of feudalistic landlords who are symbolically delineated as the mighty animals in this jungle where they are free to hunt and kill. This jungle consists of the beasts, animals and birds of different types and the roles have been assigned to them as per their status and ethnicity. Such a wild picture of India is often held by common European has as explained by Romila Thapar at the very beginning of her book—"Only the snake-charmer remains: generally an ill-fed man who risks his life to catch a snake, removes its poisonous fangs, and makes it sway to the movement of the gourd pipe; and all this in the hope of the occasional coin to feed him, his family, and the snake." (Thapar, 1990: 15) [8] On the face of it, the picture of India presented by Adiga seems to hold conformity with that of

irrational European perception, yet the deeper aesthetics of the novel pronounce of his satirical and thus corrective purpose.

The symbolic representation of human beings in the form of certain animal species is the artistic endeavour of the novelist to aesthetically propound the idea of feudal hegemonies prevailing in the country. The four domineering landlords viz. Buffalo, Wild Boar, Raven and Stork rule Laxmangarh; they have been given the symbolic naming in conformability to the propensities of the animals they represent. The Stork, having parasitical propensities and adept at killing, is the prototype of typical feudalism replete with avarice, debauchery, arrogance, insensitivity and other vicious attributes which bring forth his image of being red in tooth and claw:

The Stork was a fat man with a fat moustache, thick and curved and pointy at the tips. He owned the river that flows outside the village, and he took a cut of every catch of fish caught by every fisherman in the river, and a toll from every boatman who crossed the river to come to our village. (WT, 24-25)

It is in conformity with the species' propensities that Adiga ascribes the role in the jungle of exploitation and free hunting. The Stork feeds himself through the watery ways since the boatmen and the fishermen are bound to nourish him at the cost of their maintenance. Balram is the chauffeur to the Stork who puts him through the mill in multiple tasks such as cooking, sweeping, washing and massaging his dirty feet etc. The man having the special capacity of gluttony who can eat up abundance of riches and exploit the poor are described as Buffalo, "The Buffalo was one of the landlords in Laxmangarh. There were three others, and each had got his name from the peculiarities of appetite that had been detected in him." (24)

Such symbolic delineation of the exploiting and ruling class in the form of the mighty animals with great avarice and gluttony carries the hint of perfect jungle setting wherein the mighty can survive and thrive. The poor working class comprising rickshaw pullers, peasants, labourers, etc. Have to earn their livelihood with sweat of their brow but they are bound to spare a good deal of their hard earned money for these omnivorous species. It goes to the credit of the novelist that he ascribes the roles of these landlords of jungle appropriate to their natural propensities. Buffalo has great gluttony, Raven pilfers at dry land whatever he finds, Stork rules the waters selecting the best food for nourishment and Wild Boar hunts freely with no castration.

In order to perpetuate the servitude the poor wagers are so groomed socially for exploitation at the hands of these landlords that they take it as their fate to serve them for generations. Dalit women from labour class are not capable to put any objection against the lustful advancements of such domineering animal forces. The inferior animals in this Indian hinterland have to live abiding by the rules laid by the powerful ruling animals. The dalits in India can never dream of human dignity and they have to completely put themselves in the service of such powerful tyrants. The Raven can sexually exploit the poor if they cannot pay him the commission from their hard earned wages. This jungle where the mighty are set to hunt, exploit and kill the weaker gives the impression of Indian Animal Farm House based on hierarchy. In fact, the pages of the novel serve as an animal

farm house since the narrative is furthered with recurrent images of animals here and there. This artistic acumen at using these recurring animal images and allusions imparts the concreteness and even sensuousness to the poetry of the novel and to the idea of artistic representation of Indian social jungle.

Adiga, in this regard, seems to share a great deal with Ted Hughes as both the writers have unchecked obsession with the animal world. While Hughes' obsession for animals is critically analyzed to be his chief artistic tool reinforcing the vitality and vigour of animal life in the anaemic modern human society. Nevertheless, when this animal obsession signifies the sense cultural connectivity and childhood predicament Adiga has greater deal to share with A. K. Ramanujan. That is why one thematic and befitting obsession which the Ramanujan and Adiga seem to be preoccupied with is the use of recurrent imageries of motley animals in their writings. Almost every plot, or say event in the novel and poetic description serve as the farmland for the living animals with their imageries, references or allusions. The concept of animal omnipresence in the vast scheme of their literary craftsmanship has been artistically and symbolically deployed as the connecting force within the structure of the poetry and the narrative.

The animals of different types, dreadful as well as friendly species, in the novel of the former and poems of the latter are set to cause the sense of disgust, gloom, death, certain analogies, vitality and even celebration. Snakes, disgusting and nauseating fish at dinner plate, red bony chicken like human flesh, young pigs in slum, tamed mysterious buffaloes, white tiger, big lizards, alligators, insects such as wasps and other amphibians—crawl, move and figure in the literary world of both the writers.

Any object in real life for Ramanujan would catapults his memory to his Indian past and he deploys it as a poetic metaphor which reveals his feelings and predicament of past Indian life. The poem "Breaded Fish" in his anthology *The Striders* lays bare his disgusting feelings in the past when a wobbling plump fish gave him nausea. Once he is invited to eat the fish but the image of the fish on plate takes him into remote past reminding him—"a hood/of memory like a coil on a health/ opened in my eyes." (Poli & Reddy, 2010: 72) [6] And he cannot eat this breaded fish on—"a blunt headed/smelt...". Similar sense of disgust occurs in *The White Tiger* when Balram in sullen mood realizes the fact of his brother Kishan's being terribly pressured under the burden of household. "There was red, curried bone and flesh in front of me-and it seemed to me that they had served me flesh from Kishan's own body on the plate." (WT, 85)

The poem "Snakes" embodies the poet's great fear of the drenched Indian monsoon hinterland replete with frightening venomous reptiles and the thought of which shivers down his spine. The description of snake such as 'brown wheat glisten ringed with ripples' and the continuous hissing sound gives the poem regular rhythm and thus creates the air of fear and mystery for this Indian land of magic and mystery for American readers. However, in Chicago he seems to be bit relieved at having got rid of the disturbing past. The words of Bruce king hold conformity to the fact of this poem's scariness and Ramanujan's relief from the past:

The poem ("Snakes") presents an image, a complex of feelings, distilled memories and events, which are not

elaborated or commented upon. But as it begins in the present 'now' of the museum and bookshelves which contrast with rural India and family life, the poem celebrates a liberation from the fears of the past, 'ghosts' from which Ramanujan feels safe. He is not really liberated from his memories, if he were; he would not be recalling snakes in a foreign libraries. The past keeps intruding. (King, 1995: 67)

The antithetical poetic imagination consists of the memories of Indian Arcadian countryside in contrast to civilized urban American society serve as the potent poetic idea in the poem. R. Parthasarthy also observes this fact about Ramanujan's psychological state, "For past fifteen years, he has lived in The United States. His Indian experience repeatedly features in his verse, and is often precisely repeated in its original settings. But this American experience seems less frequently to impinge on his verse..." (Parthasarthy, 1976: 100) [5] Whereas, Adiga's world seems to be filled with animals as they are in Indian hinterland, however, somewhere he also shares the with the poet the sense of phobic disliking for reptiles is also present in *The White Tiger* as Balram, who otherwise would love animals, is found frightened of a monster lizard--'light green like a half guava'; this lizard is the most scary and disgusting creature for him. This monster reptile in the school cupboard that stands as hindrance in way to education for Balram is crushed by Balram's father. This suggests the crushing of evil or anything that comes in your way to success. Adiga touches the heights of aesthetics when he symbolically delineates this monster pretending to be good and harmless creature

A faded mural of the Lord Buddha surrounded by deer and squirrels decorated the fourth wall- it was the only wall that the teacher spared. The giant lizard the colour of half ripe guava was sitting in front of this wall, pretending to be one of the animals at the feet of the Lord Buddha. (WT, 29-30)

This aesthetically rich description signifies the reality of vicious and harmful people pretending to be modest in post-modern sophisticated settings. But Ramanujan cannot be restricted to be the poet of uniform moods as he nostalgically enjoys the reminiscences of lively rural Indian past amidst lifeless and placid settings in America. In the poems "Love Poem for Wife I" and "Prayers to Lord Murugan" he vehemently yearns for vitality and life force in the vigorous world of animals in India in contrast to lifelessness and sophistication of the West. In the former he refers to her (his wife) "village dog-ride, 'the mythology of seven crazy ants'" (Love Poem for Wife I. at--- Parthasarthy, 100) But "Prayers to Lord Murugan" puts forward the nostalgia of tribal vitality, fertility, fecundity, animal vigour and impulse. The poet calls upon this tribal god to bless the modern world with vibrant life full of flesh and blood characterized with dancing, cock fight and mirthful celebration in tribal style:

Lord of new arrivals lovers and rivals arrive at once
with cockfight and banner dance till and on this next
three hills
(Stanza 1, "Prayers to Lord Murugan" retrieved from:

<http://allpoetry.com/poem/8613973-Prayers-To-Lord-Murugan-by-A.K.-Ramanujan>)

The cocks are put into severe fight; their legs tied with sharpened spurs causing flow of blood through violent slitting, cutting and hard pecking—this all signifies life force through tribal style. In the tenth stanza, in the same poem, the poet wants for the dirt of slum with soiled pigs in contrast to clean but lifeless Chicagoan environs:

Lord returns us. Bring us back to a litter of six new
pigs in slum and a sudden quarter of harvest
(Stanza 10, Prayers to Lord Murugan" Retrieved from:
<http://allpoetry.com/poem/8613973-Prayers-To-Lord-Murugan-by-A.K.-Ramanujan>)

The imagery of six new young pigs suckling the swine and crying vibrantly in slum suggests Keatsean aesthetics when this great romanticist envies the sylvan life of nightingale and tribal booze and languor in remote settings. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn" too Keats, like Ramanujan, endeavours to bring the lively picture of ancient tribal rural sacrifice which signifies solidarity in life.

However, Adiga in the present novel just describes the presence of animals in Indian life with aesthetics to realize the concreteness of poetic thoughts in the scheme of the novel. He hardly shows his personal loath or yearnings with anything in the jungle full of varied animals. The very title of the novel is helpful in the politics of the novelist's theory of resistance and deterrence on the part of the working class against the exploiting rich feudal class; the white tiger being the different and exceptional species to set the example of liberation from the tyrannical clutches. Balram has been projected as esoteric and class apart from the millions chicks and inferior animals in the rooster coop as he finally manages his safe exit and subsequent rise. The following description reveals that how Balram alias Munna came to be chosen as representing a separate class of his own--different and excellent from the crowd of other boys:

The inspector pointed his cane straight at me. 'You, the young man, are an intelligent, honest, vivacious fellow in this crowd of thugs and idiots. In any jungle, what is the rarest of animals—the creature that comes along only once in a generation?'

I thought about it and said:

'The white tiger'

'That's what you are, in this jungle.' (WT, 35)

The government official on inspection himself sounded different and honest unlike corrupt school teacher; the inspector being honest with keen insight to trace out the exceptional species like white tiger amongst various animals. At the fag-end of the story there comes the stance of identification and strong association of Balram's being with the white tiger in the National zoo in Delhi. The description of various animals in the zoo symbolically speaks of the Indian society wherein the protagonist along with his nephew Dharam confronts the white tiger and faints imbibing personality of the tiger. Through the desire of the beast to escape the cage Adiga artistically suggests the desire and ability of Balram to break the social shackles down and get free. Dharam writes this spectacle in a letter to

granny:

I called out the people around me, and we carried Uncle to a banyan tree. Someone poured water on his face. The good people slapped Uncle hard and made him wake up. They turned to me and said, 'Your uncle is raving- he is saying goodbye to his grandmother. He must think he's going to die.' Uncle's eyes were open now. 'Are you all right, Uncle?' I asked. He took my hand and said, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I asked, Sorry for what?' And he said, 'I can't live the rest of my life in a cage, Granny.' I'm so sorry,' (278)

The description embodies the artistic metaphysics of the novelist to propound the idea of liberation and revolt. Balram is artistically likened to the white tiger, a rare species which observes its own style of freedom and majesty. Balram's utterance of the reluctance to stay any longer in the cage is addressed to the granny and thus to the forefathers of the working poor class who have been adept to slavery in the coops. This incident imparts ample spunk to Balram to liberate himself from perennial slavery and rise as an entrepreneur by killing his employer.

Whereas for Ramanujan the animal is not mere a symbol caged in human world rather it is a messenger of spirituality and thus of ultimate freedom. In his most celebrated and discussed poem "The Striders" Ramanujan forcefully puts forward the inevitability and indispensability of animals and insects in our life when he deploys a water bug as the metaphor to represent his poetic ideas:

Thin stemmed, bubble eyed water bugs
See them perch on the dry capillary legs
Weightless on the ripple skin of a stream
(The Striders, p. 03. At-- Poli & Ready, 69)

Here, the water bug is striding the flowing stream with its thin legs in the running water maintaining the balance. Spiritual connotations of this instance of the bug maintaining the balance on running water tell of its harmony with nature and adaptability to life better than that of humans. Such poems, wherein Ramanujan celebrates his past mingled with animal world, speak of poet's self-reflexivity and craving for some lost values.

Nevertheless, the new age typical post-colonial writers like Adiga do not show any cravings for values but seems to delineate the things as they are rather in ironic tone with satirical purpose. It is a satire on human world that Adiga describes animals like buffalo being more important than human beings at household settings. The recurrent reference and description of the most majestic creature in human world i. e. water buffalo support the fact of inevitable presence of animals. On page fourteen, twenty, and twenty-two and at the latter parts the water buffalo is recurrent image.

At the doorway to my house, you'll see the most important member of my family. The water buffalo. She was the fattest thing in the family; this was true in every house in the village. All day long, the women fed her fresh grass; feeding her was the main thing in their live. (WT, 20)

Soon the idea of buffalo strikes again as the description such

as,--'A man driving a buffalo cart had stopped in front of us'--ensures the presence of animal even at metal roads. In describing Mr. Mukesh's (called mongoose, the animal to kill even snakes) departure from Delhi, things should go on plain ways, but Adiga here also brings animals, "...down below the tracks, a mouse nibbled on the discarded potatoes..." (191) The novel concept of Rooster Coop, which carries the aesthetics of animal world, is very appropriate to bring forth the fact of slavery and misery of the working class owing to unchecked exploitation of them as the rooster coop is protected from inside by the roosters themselves. They foil any attempt of escape as it is never locked from outside by the exploiters. Adiga resorts to animal world again to describe this perennial system and workings of rooster coop and thus slavery system. In Delhi Balram witnesses such sullen and horrific reality:

I saw a buffalo coming down the road, pulling a large cart behind it. There was no human sitting on this cart with a whip; the buffalo just knew on its own where to go. And it was coming down the road. I stood to the side, and as it passed me, I saw that this cart was full of the faces of dead buffalos... (255-256)

It is important to note that the buffalo needs no one to drive it but it has been conditioned to do its job of carrying bodies of its butchered family; and one day it would also be fated to same type of doom. Through such description and concept of the employability of the homo-creatures for carrying forward the business of their own exploitation the writer artistically brings forth the fact continuing colonial system even in twenty first century India. This obsession of animals for aesthetic purpose is so strong for Adiga that he finds the presence of animals inevitable even in the posh modern settings of Gurgaon and Delhi to delineate urban the jungle. The phrases such as 'country mouse', 'human spider' referring to Balram's apparently being novice and for poor working boys respectively are recurrent here and there. Even urban traffic scenario is delineated with the references of animals,--"everyone honked. Every now and then, the various horns, each with its own pitch, blended with one continuous wail that sounded like a calf taken from its mother." (137)

At Ashok's flat at thirteenth floor B Block in Gurgaon the lobby of the house is hugely decorated with the picture of Cuddle and Puddle, the pair of dog with Stork at Dhanbad, but the writer makes their presence felt in urban settings also. Animal imagery may be inevitable in describing the rustic reality of country life as in the phrases such as-'cone-like tower, with black intertwining snakes', 'pale-skinned dog', 'families of pigs', feather-roosters fly up' etc. yet, Adiga deploys such imageries as artistic tools to propound and establish certain ideas. It is for the sake of stylistic and figurative description, for instance, that he does not miss the very subtle reference also as--'ticks of death between her fingers'—tells the killing of lice by the woman. But more interesting is the imagination of the writer in another simile while describing the togetherness of sleeping women in poor settings, "At night they sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede." (21) The structure of the plots and the whole texture of novel have been tied with a common thread that runs parallel through the pages in the form of recurrent animals or their imageries. As early as on page twelve while Adiga is

describing the prevalence of technology in India to Chinese Premier he inevitably resorts to an animal simile, “and you know how we Indians just take to technology like ducks to water.” (12) In fact the pages of the novel and the poetic world of Ramanujan are appallingly crowded with animals, their references, allusions and imageries enabling both the artists to get the better expression of the concepts, ideas and philosophy of perennial slavery and of darkness they intend to propound. As literary tools these recurrent animal images, their references and allusions serve the purpose of rendering seam and common thread to the texture of *The White Tiger*; while in case of Ramanujan they constitute the archetypal and mythical poetic base for the proper expression of his nostalgia, fear, and other predicaments. And that is why the writings of both these writers emerge like a discourse of Indian animal farm house based on hierarchies.

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