The Reconfiguration of Core and Periphery in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract

This essay discusses Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* published in 1940 and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* published in 2008 as two distinct examples of writers from the subcontinent employing specific stylistic devices to respond to particular periods of historical crisis through their fiction. This essay looks at the use of setting, language, intertextuality and other stylistic modes that the narratives adopt to address the historical and socio-cultural crisis that they grapple with at two distinct junctures in the city's and by implication India's history.

In this paper I argue that both authors pick and choose literary and stylistic devices to create an amalgamation of techniques that can meaningfully represent the specific historical crises their works deal with. To contextualize my methodological praxis it is necessary to refer to interpretation of core-periphery relations in Marxist literary critic Benita Parry's reading of world systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin and others; Parry uses this reading to understand the aesthetic affinity in peripheral countries due to a similar past experience in colonialism and capitalism, which according to her gives birth to stylistic irregularities in art. Many stylistic irregularities in these novels are examples of both how the meaning and value of core and periphery change over time, whether it be in a nation, or in global geographical dispensation; and how literary and artistic works register these changes and play the complexities of historical modernity into their narrative fabric.

Key words : core-periphery, stylistic irregularities, novel form, post-independence India.

This essay discusses Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* published in 1940 and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* published in 2008 as two distinct examples of writers from the subcontinent employing specific stylistic devices to respond to particular periods of historical crisis through their fiction. Ahmed Ali's novel situates the narrative in a pre-independence India and mediates the historical crisis of the independence movement through memory, building a referential connection with the revolt of 1857 which the author considers as the first war of Independence against the British rule. It uses poetry as a linguistic and thematic correlative of the lost

time and culture of Mughal Delhi, bringing into play a nostalgia that is created from the representation of the everyday practices of a disappearing generation and the slow change of historical time; whereas, Aravind Adiga is conversant with the Delhi of the millennium. Adiga represents Delhi in all its postcolonial complexity, the political capital of India is shown to be veering towards a commercial cosmopolitanism as a result of the investments of global market economy. However, the modern relations of production are based on modified forms of feudal exploitation which are camouflaged by the pretentions of social mobility and newer forms of master/servant relationships. Adiga uses Bollywood films and the genre of self-help books to represent the incongruities of the social reality. My argument is that both authors pick and choose literary and stylistic devices to create an amalgamation of techniques that can meaningfully represent the specific historical crises their works deal with.To contextualize my methodological praxis it is necessary to refer to the interpretation of core-periphery relations in Marxist literary critic Benita Parry's reading of world systems theory by Immanuel Wallerstein, Samir Amin and others,[1] which Parry uses to understand the aesthetic affinity in peripheral countries due to a similar past experience in colonialism and capitalism which according to Parry gives birth to stylistic irregularities in art.

Both the novels situate the city of Delhi as the central locus of action and representation. In Ahmed Ali's novel, Delhi occupies a shifting position along the axis of centre, semi-periphery and periphery. During the Mughal period Delhi was the capital of the subcontinent followed by Calcutta which remained the capital of British administration up until 1911. In 1912 because of the rising tide of nationalism in Bengal the government was shifted to Delhi and the city again acquired political prominence. This enabled the British to make strategic use of the historical heritage of Delhi as the capital of Mughal India in order to reassert the supremacy of the British dominion in India. Ali traces Delhi's status as the ancient seat of capital back to the epic Mahabharata and Yudhisthir's establishment of Hastinapur [2] (conjectured to be around present location of Delhi).The English government thus contrived a natural perpetuity of rule in the political imagination of the people of India. The shift of the capital to Delhi also initiated a cosmopolitanism that threatened to demolish the jealously guarded culture, language and way of life of the Muslim population of Delhi. As Ali records in the novel, the changes wrought on the physical

topography of the city were 'resented' by its inhabitants,

> for their city, in which they had been born and grew up, the city
> of their dreams and reality, which had seen them die and live,
> was going to be changed beyond recognition. They passed bitter
> remarks and denounced the farangis.[3]

Delhi's defining presence in the psyche of the characters is evident in the way in which the author contextualizes Mir Nihal's identity in the historicity of the city space.[4] It is from such an association that he is able to articulate a critique of the empire situating the historic centrality of Delhi as the capital of the Mughal rule and its relegation to a peripheral status vis-à-vis the imperial metropole London.[5] Ahmed Ali envisions the by-lanes of Delhi as an 'insidious game of chess that intersects the streets and the city'[6] evoking a feeling of suffocation and death. However, on the day of the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary in December, 1911, celebrated with an imperial durbar (gathering) in Delhi, Mir Nihal visualizes the city in very different terms. The 'insidious lanes' give way to the city as a familiar space mapped by association with the names of Mughal emperors, evoking popular myths and legends. His reminiscing telescopes the bygone topographies of Delhi into one single impression of loss and nostalgia.

> Right in front of him was Red Fort built long ago by Shah Jahan,
> on his right, beyond the city wall, was the KhooniDarwaza, the
> bloody gate; and beyond that was still the old fort built by Feroz
> Shah Tughlaq … still beyond stretched the remnants of the past
> Delhi's and of the ravished splendour of once mighty
> Hindustan—a Humayun's tomb or a QutubMinar. There it was
> that the Hindu kings had built the early Delhis, Hastinapur or
> Dilli; and still in Mahroli stands the iron pillar as a memory of
> Asoka; and the ruins of India's golden age, and dynasties greater
> than history has ever known.[7]

The historicity of the narrative that Mir Nihal constructs derives from a Delhi composed of personal spaces: the *zenana* or the space of women in the house,the *mardana* where the men reside and visitors are received and shared spaces of the community life revolving around the sport of pigeon keeping and kite flying.

Ahmed Ali also makes thematic and linguistic use of 'Shayeri' or Urdu poetry to evoke nostalgia for the lived reality of a vanishing world. But the

use of *shayeri* also has a political and social dimension to it.It finds the most poignant and moving expression in Gul Bano's rendition of the poems of Bahadur Shah II, the last Mughal emperor.Gul Bano is depicted as an erstwhile princess of the Mughal dynasty driven out of the city during the British retaliatory violence in the aftermath of the 1857 revolt, and reduced to begging from door to door. Gul Bano's melodies become a means to chronicle the lost grandeur of her predecessor's glories. She bemoans the loss thus:

> How shall I tell the tale of woe,
> My heart is rent with agony.
> Delhi was once a paradise,
> Such peace had abided here.
> But*they* have ravished its name and pride,
> Remain now only ruins and care.
> Ravished were the people of Hind,
> Unenviable their fate.
> Whoever the ruler of the day
> Espied was ordered put to death.
> They were not even given a shroud,
> Nor buried under the ground.
> No one performed their funeral rites,
> There graves were not marked even by a mound. [8]

The poetry comments on the abysmal treatment meted out to the Muslims by the British government, captured in the following way: 'Yet not content with this alone/they suspect every Muslim who says/even a word against them, /and with his life the penalty pays....'[9]

The novel reports conversations interspersed with strains of Urdu poetry combined with patterns of music that replicate the rhythms of life.These include songs of *savan* (monsoon) that greet the rainy season in India with its associations of birth and spring as well as wedding songs that evoke the pain of parting.[10]Reference to communal living is explicated through allusions to alchemy and Mir Nihal's obsession with finding the correct 'prescription' to create gold, and we hear his friends and colleagues coming together with their own stories of deciphering the divine mystery.[11]In deciphering the ingredients to the impossible miracle potion

the discussions turn into practical philosophies of life that brought them together as a community and strengthened faith in religion and the divine. These disparate elements combine in a powerful climax when Mir Nihal on his way back from witnessing the degradation of the Indian royalty in their servitude to the British monarch at the coronation ceremony encounters a beggar 'lifting himself up on his hands and dragging his legs along the floor; and a bag was hanging round his neck.'[12] The beggar turns out to be Mirza Nasirul Mulk, the youngest son of Bahadur Shah II, the last king of the Mughal dynasty. Bahadur Shah's poetry serves as an epithet that also resurfaces at other crucial junctures in the novel.[13] The eloquence of poetry addresses the historical crisis of the rising extremist nationalism in the country against the oppression of colonialism. The first section of the novel begins with the epithet: 'The night is dark, the waves rise mountain high, / and such a storm is raging! /What do the pedestrians know my plight moving / upon the shore that's safe and dry?'[14] The poem speaks to both the political crisis as well as the personal anguish of Asghar's lovelorn heart.[15] The novel strikes a convergence between the narrative mediated by music and poetry and the historical phase of violence, uncertainty and instability. It draws from representational devices of earlier indigenous genres 'amalgamating'them with the western form of the novel. These include translations of Urduverseinto English language and rhythm to create a 'unique analytical lens'to view the contemporary reality.[16]

In the context of the publication history of the novel, Delhi appears in a new relationship with the imperial metropolis London. Initially in accordance with the colonial politics of repression, the novel submitted to the Hogarth Press for publication was returned to the author with requests for removal of the sections on the Indian war of independence in 1857.Subsequently, Ali consulted E.M. Foster who supported his refusal to omit the said sections; yet the printers persisted. Eventually, Desmond McCarthy suggested to Virginia Woolf that the book be submitted to Harold Nicholson who was the official censor of Hogarth Press. Nicholson passed the book without cuts and it was published in the autumn of 1940.[17]The geographical mutilation of the subcontinent during the partition imposed other constraints on the novel, especially because of its association with Delhi. Ali registers his discontent with the post partition reception of the novel in terms of the problematic provoked by the

representation of Delhi in the text. Ali alleges that in India, the Oxford University Press 'changed its character completely' by highlighting in the blurb of the novel that it describes a 'culture and a way of life in the predominantly Muslim areas of the city.'[18] This insinuates a cultural exclusivity which according to Ali denies the fact that Delhi was in effect a Muslim inhabited area during the time the novel describes. Alternatively, in Pakistan a television adaptation of the novel was refused telecast by the manager of the local station on the grounds that its scene was laid in the 'forbidden city across the border' (Ali). The debates surrounding the location of the novel highlights Delhi's shifting position along the centre and periphery dynamics. The city first exists as the ruins of the fallen Mughal Empire, strategically demolished to showcase a negative comparison to the western, imperial industrial and economic success of Calcutta. In the course of the novel, during the turn of the twentieth century, the shift in colonial rationality of rule brought Delhi in focus again as the capital of the British Empire and reconfigured its relationship to the imperial metropolis London.[19] Outside the relocations operating inside the novel the city emerges as a locus of conflict in terms of its literary and geographical centrality in the politically strained atmosphere in the post-independence sub-continent.

Adiga's novel posits a different interpretation of the centre-periphery dialectic in the context of the city of Bangalore, the tech capital of India. Adiga's novel makes a journey into the inner psyche of 'shining India'. It gives us a glimpse of how caste and class barriers, the rich and the poor, the zamindar and the peasant, the city and village differences have endured or morphed to preserve age old traditions in the modern socio-economic structure. Delhi exists as the centre of the India of 'light' as opposed to the vast 'darkness' that spreads along the greater part of the country still engaged in an agricultural economy that perpetuates class based exploitation and is mired in superstition and poverty.[20] Bangalore based on an alternate economic principle of corporatized economy does not create as Benita Parry suggests an amalgamation of the various unequal forces but a disguised continuation of the centre periphery dialectic within a more close knit and complex structure.[21]

The fact that Adiga's novel was awarded the Man Booker Prize in the very year of its publication (2008) adds another layer of complexity to the

reception and critical attention of the novel. *The Guardian* article on Adiga's win titled 'Out of the Darkness: Adiga's White Tiger rides to Booker Victory against the odds'[22] quotes the chair of the judges panel, Michael Portillo,describing the feeling among the judges, as, 'here was a book on the cutting edge, dealing with a different aspect of India, unfamiliar perhaps to many readers. What set it apart was its originality. The feeling was that this was new territory.' Portillo further states, 'Something extraordinary is happening between the rich and the poor. Once, there was at least a common culture between rich and poor, but that has been eroded, and people have noted that.' Adiga's protagonist Balram, a fugitive and murderer, of Ashok Sharma, his previous employer, whose name he uses for running a transport service for the international I.T. company in Bangalore, is narrating a series of seven letters to the Chinese Premier Mr. Wen Jiabao on the eve of a state visit. The objective of the premier's visit to Bangalore as reported by the local media is to 'know the truth about Bangalore' and interact with Indian entrepreneurs. Balram the son of an impoverished rickshaw-puller, who by lying and betraying has ensured his steady ascent to the heady heights of Bangalore's big business, offers to enlighten the Chinese premier 'free of charge.'[23]

This particular trope of enlightenment is critiqued through several instances in the novel where the narrative reverts back to the figure of Balram in the meditative posture of the Buddha which is an ironic reminder of the mural painted on the wall of Balram's classroom in his village where education was a disappointment. Most of the quotes Balram cites or examples he gives are from scraps of paper used for wrapping food in most food stalls across the country or cheap magazines sold at footpaths in metropolitan cities. His education is not much different from R.K.Narayan's protagonist Raju in *The Guide* (1958).Not much seems to have changed in the Indian villages in the intervening years between these two novels. The style of narration in this book, the secret to the business future of the coming age, derives inspiration from cellophane wrapped bootlegged copies of American business books or 'self-help' books which is a very successful genre of literature in the current publishing scenario. Adiga even introduces a 'side-bar' in the narrative in accordance with the pattern of the self-help books. Though the idea of 'self-help' is ironically central to the plot of this novel, it manages to poke fun at the improvised

education of majority of Indians resulting in 'half-baked' individuals unaware and incapable of doing justice to the responsibility that parliamentary democracy instils in all its citizens.[24] This creates loopholes which are misused by the moneyed and powerful class to perpetuate exploitation.

Adiga constructs the dualities of light and dark India only to dissolve such divides into chaotic and unequal social spaces. The incongruities of uneven relationship between the capitalist high end production techniques and traditional equations of power continue in newer guises in the India of light. The growth of information technology had led to the demand of a new economic infrastructure giving birth to an alternative social reality. The middleclass was now transforming into the 'corporate elite'– a new kind of rich and powerful class outside the hierarchical bureaucratic structure of caste and class. The cosmopolitan nature of this third space, constituted mostly of migrants from other parts of the country, granted the security of anonymity. This anonymity and new relations of power only served to camouflage the unequal divisions of the extreme rich and the extreme poor. There is no one traditional and cultural constant, 'the city was full of outsiders. No one would notice one more'.[25]

At a decisive point in the novel Balram, sitting on a pavement waiting for the malls of Noida, Delhi, to open, sees paw marks on the concrete, possibly created by an animal before the cement had set. He follows the paw marks on the concrete which lead him to the slum behind the malls, where the paved route ended into raw earth, an area marked off by five defecating men, an area of the darkness where the construction workers lived.[26] The people who were building the exquisite malls and buildings were living under tarpaulin sheets! The image of two children splashing about in the black water jostling to catch hold of a hundred rupee note is not only a visual equivalent to the dark river (Ganga) that flows through the darkness but also seals the ultimate irony of the so called 'light'. The darkness pervades beyond this weak illumination; it is the blood and sweat of the poor that lies buried under the glass façades of shopping malls selling foreign goods, absurdly no poor person is allowed into these buildings once they are finished. The hysterical laughter and conversation between Balram and one of the men defecating is a representation of this absurd hypocrisy.

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This absurdity in the power equation of the socio-economic and political structure is interwoven with reference to the Hindi films and murder weeklies that Balram refers to in his narrative. The Hindi movies with their utopian good versus evil plot lines where the poor hero gets the better of his rich persecutors, typically characteristic of the 80s and 90s era of Hindi film industry is much referred to, yet subverted in Balram's narrative. This novel too sketches the success story of a poor village boy becoming a rich 'entrepreneur' in Bangalore, but the complexity and brutality of the narrative mocks the simplistic narrative and virtuous character of the Hindi film hero—an ideal. Adiga's protagonist performs a subversion of the conformist, virtuous pattern of the 1970's Hindi film hero. A typical Hindi film hero, is portrayed mostly as belonging to the Hindu faith (to ensure a larger mass appeal), he is born in dire poverty and grows up to claim his rights from the rich villains, with a lot of action and romance thrown in, the film ends in the ultimate reconciliation of the atheist and anti-social hero with God and society. In the novel Balram's journey from poverty to riches selectively subverts the trope of the popular myth of heroism to cope with the gruesome excess of the real with the help of the manufactured unreality of popular Hindi cinema giving the uncomfortable reality depicted in this novel a 'pop-art' effect.

Adiga thus uses the genre of self-help books and Bollywood films to create the narrative of the division between wealth and poverty and the cultural consciousness in neoliberal modern millennial India; Ali exploits the rich Indian literary heritage of Urdu poetry and music to stage the importance of Muslim history and orientation of Delhi which was under erasure as the nationalist history of India was being written in the post-independence period. Both of them write in a time when India goes through dire historical crises – of partition and the claiming of a city space in one instance and of millennial India fuelled up by the IT revolution and the rise of alternative city spaces like Bangalore, in the other. Delhi figures prominently in both the novels as a core geographical space with historical, financial and commercial heritage, while there are also significant references to alternative peripheral spaces that are slowly taking the focus away from the core space or the meaning that it holds. The use of aesthetic properties including poetry and film in fiction is a suggestion of how art mediates historical consciousness. Concluding the discussion one can argue in reference to Benita Parry's article cited earlier, on peripheral

modernity, which speaks of irrealism, the juxtaposition of contradictory characteristics as an inherent aesthetic property of peripheral countries which have gone through the terrible fate of colonialism, capitalism, and imperialism. This juxtaposition arises because of the pre-colonial cultural affluence that most of these countries possessed and which struggled against the imposition of colonial cultures. Because of India's long pre-colonial and colonial/imperial past, literary modernity or late colonial /postcolonial literature in India is conscious of the possibility of amalgamation of various cultural forms which pave the ground for irrealism, and/or other hybrid narrative tropes.[27] Ali's use of poetry and music in novel writing is a conscious choice to criticize the western rationalist orientation of the city-space of New Delhi contrary to the organic, poetic and mythic dimension that characterized lived space of Delhi in the Mughal period. Alternatively, Adiga's use of Bollywood and self-help genre is a critique of the consumerist capitalist and highly discriminating nature of city-space in current India. The many stylistic irregularities in their fictions are examples of both how the meaning and value of core and periphery change over time whether it be in a nation, or in global geographical dispensation, and how literary and artistic work register these changes and play the complexities of historical modernity into their narrative fabric.

Endnotes :

1 Benita Parry, 'Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms,' *Ariel*, 40.1(2009): 27-55; Immanuel Wallerstein, 'World-Systems Analysis' *Social Theory Today*, ed. Anthony Giddens and Johnathan H. Turner (Stanford:
Stanford University Press, 1987), pp. 309-324; Samir Amin, 'Economic Globalism and Political Universalism,' *Journal of World System Research* 1.3 (2000): 582–622.

2 Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* (1940; Repr. New Delhi: Rupa, 2007), p.145. In this context also see, William Dalrymple, *The City of Djinns* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

3 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.196-197.

4 Ali creates a symbiotic relationship between the geographical layout of Old Delhi and the way of life it made possible. Mir Nihal's character develops in relation to the serpentine by-lanes, the sport of pigeon flying

and the people, beggars, prostitutes, fakirs and friends that inhabit the city.

5 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi,* pp.144-150.

6 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.6.

7 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.145.

8 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.140.

9 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.140.

10 'He said that he would come, / that he would come. / The clouds have come at last, / But oh, he has not come, / Full one year has passed.' Ali, p.132.

11 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, pp.120-125.

12 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.150.

13 There is an instance in the novel where a beggar who sang only the Mughal King Bahadur Shah's songs and was therefore known as Bahadur Shah; it is an ironic representation of the ruin of the Muslim monarchy in its now usurped seat of capital. Ali, p.133.

14 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.1.

15 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p.28.

16 Parry, 'Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms,' p.35.

17 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, pp.-xxi.

18 Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, p. xx.

19 The change in the colonial rationale of rule is discussed in detail in Jon E. Wilson *The Domination of Strangers* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

20 Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2008), pp. 14-15. Balram defines India as 'two countries in one: an India of Light, and an India of Darkness.' He says that the river Ganges brings Darkness to India—the black river, 'Everywhere the river flows, that area is the Darkness.

21 Parry, 'Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms,' p.35.

22 Charlotte Higgins, 'Out of the Darkness: Adiga's White Tiger rides to Booker victory against the odds,' The Guardian 14th October, 2008

<www.theguardian.com/books/2008/oct/14/booker-prize-adiga-white-tiger>, Accessed: 15th August, 2016.

23 Adiga, *The White Tiger* p.6.

24 Adiga, *The White Tiger* p.11.

25 Adiga, *The White Tiger* p.296.

26 Adiga, *The White Tiger* p. 235.

27 Parry, 'Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms,' p.39, 42. Parry takes irrealism from the French Marxist critic Michael Löwy who defines it as a critique of reality as it is and exemplifies the form in dystopian, fantastic, fairy-tale, and oneiric narratives. Michael Löwy, 'The Current of Critical Irrealism' *Adventures in Realism*. Ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 193–206.