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## Identity, Society, Performativity: The Construction of Identity in Aravind Adiga's *the White Tiger*

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### ABSTRACT

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *the White Tiger* (2008) depicts the life of Barlam Halwai, a poor Indian village boy on his way to success. The novel, merging the issues of race and class in a unique way, offers new possibilities for investigation in the realms of identity and subjectivity in a postcolonial context. The present study, then, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity in its broad sense, examines the construction of subjectivities in this novel and attempts to depict the performative nature of the characters' identities, especially, that of the protagonist of the novel, Balram Halwai. Thus, this paper, based on this theory of Butler and through the exploration of the subjectivities of the main characters of the novel, demonstrates how, rather than innate qualities, a sense of identity stems from a set of repeated acts regulated by the norms of society, which, in the case of this novel, is a postcolonial society. Furthermore, the paper depicts how, any failure of, or disruption in performative patterns in the lives of characters of the novel leads to the formation of new performative patterns, and therefore, opens a horizon for agency. Nonetheless, by exploring the main characters, the study asserts that agency is only achieved in uncontroversial aspects of identity.

**Keywords:** *The White Tiger, Judith Butler, Performativity, Interpellation, Subversion, Agency*

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### 1. Introduction

Aravind Adiga's debut novel, *The White Tiger* (2008), is an epistolary novel written as a series of seven confessional letters to the Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, in his visit to India, in the "hope to learn how to make a few Chinese entrepreneurs" (p. 4), by the main character Balram Halwai, a semi-literate son of a rickshaw-puller in a small village, Laxmangarh—the village in which he introduces realities of his country's recent economic thrive. The entire novel pivots around Balram's journey from Darkness into the Light, and it is a narrative of his identity formation, or as Balram puts it, "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian" (p. 8) in a globalized country. Where he starts working as a chauffeur to a rich landlord, after killing and robbing him, he ends up as a rich and successful entrepreneur, establishing his own taxi service.

The novel gave rise to much debate over its authenticity and whether or not, the

Man Booker Prize novel, complies with re-orientalist, and therefore, inauthentic image and representation of India. By highlighting the core issues of Indian society, such as, identity crisis, hybridity, class discrimination, political corruption, poverty, influence of foreign culture and degradation of traditional values etc., it is accused of fabricating narratives about the poor of India chiefly for an affluent and/or western readership (Mendes, 2010, p. 286). In this vein, some critics, such as Lily Want (2011), by declaring that while silencing certain vices the novel ends up allowing the narcissism of Western culture raise its garrulous head, concludes:

[o]ne would easily say that as far as the lack of verisimilitude to India's postcolonial achievements is concerned, Adiga does fail in his integrity as a writer at least in *The White Tiger*. In other words, he fails to overcome the colonial tendency of undervaluing or rather devaluing indigenous traditional and cultural achievements. The

world that he portrays in the text is one without moral values where money is the only good, and corruption and brutality are inevitable. He renders a story of social mobility but reinforces and legitimatises [sic] the stereotypical and discursively framed images of the Indian just to create laughter. (p.76)

Still, Judy Polumbaum, tracing the issues explored in the novel in a scholarly book on political economy, published in the same year, praises the novel, refers to it as a complement to the theoretical text and states that ‘in his novel of caste and class warfare, Adiga drills directly into local, regional, national, and global structures of power and control with which the academic volume is centrally concerned (2008, p.436).

While debates go on, the main focus of this research is to explore other aspects of the novel, such as subjectivity of characters, which has remained mainly untouched in the shadow of such debates. Of course, in this regard, some research has been done; while some critics examine the identity of the characters by deconstructing the text, others, have touched the issues such as: hybridity, subaltern’s resistance, and subversion of the dominant system.

In their attempt to answer the ‘ambiguous’ nature of the characters, and their ‘contradictory’ behavior, Rahmat Setiawan and Ali Mustofa (2012) explore the identity of characters through Derridean lens, first, by identifying the hierarchy of binary opposition in the text, then, by reversing the binary opposition with pointing interdependence within the pair of binary opposition, and finally by tracing the absences of human identity (p. 4). And by declaring that within a single identity, there is always another identity that is absent, which can be present through breaking the presented identity, they write “human identity is not constructed by only the outside of human but also the essence of human” (p. 1) resulting in “ambiguous and plurality toward the identity” (p.15). Thus, they conclude: “Human identity that is considered as the construction from the outside part such as culture, social, and institution finally has to face a fact that the absences from the essence of human can construct the identity” (15).

Although they might be right, if only up to a point, this research, through Butlerian theory of gender performativity, will demonstrate how the sense of identity stems from socio-cultural constructions, rather than those innate features.

Some researchers have also identified Balram “as a strong voice of underdogs who ... shakes the very base of social structure” (Maji, 2015, p.2) by his revolution. Yadav, agreeing with Maji, in this regard states that Balram “overcomes to challenge and subvert the social hierarchy and the subaltern ideology imposed upon him” (as cited in Pourqoli & Puralifard, 2017, p. 215).

Then, the most important questions raised here are whether or not his identity is a socio-cultural construct; and whether he really resists and subverts the social hierarchy and discourses; Thus, the main objective of this study is to explore the changes that he undergoes in his journey, in order to identify the main reasons in his success, whether or not, he has *subverted the social hierarchy*, and the extent to which he has achieved *agency*.

Therefore, the study will mainly focus on analyzing Balram’s performative acts at the expense of other characters, in order to show how, the desire to be a real man, *a White Tiger*, the phrase by which he is hailed for the first time, or in Butler’s definition is interpellated by the authority (a school inspector), inscribes on his body and constructs his identity according to performative patterns of what he believes to be a White Tiger, that is, a social entrepreneur who ‘can break out of the coop’ (Adiga, 2008, p. 104) or the cage, that is the societal restrains of the society in which he lives. In this regard, the study, in the light of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, undertakes to depict how identities are performatively constructed, and in the case of resistance, if any, to what extent the characters are successful and achieve agency.

Judith Butler (2002), by declaring that gender identity is nothing but “*stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 191), or iteration of behavior which is regulated by the norms of a society, indicates that gender is acquired, and socially constructed. That is, rather than their ‘*origin and cause*’ it is “the *effects* of institutions, practices, [and] discourses” (p. xxxi). For Butler, identity is a combination of the way we interpret and act the received social-cultural norms and expectations; therefore, it is a choice, but not a free choice, since, one’s choice of ‘gender style’ is always limited from the start, right after being interpellated by society (Salih, 2002, p. 46). Butler (2002) also argues that whenever there is a disruption or change in these patterns of behavior, our identity changes as well: “[I]n the possibility of a



failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition . . . exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (p. 192). Butler’s theory of performativity mostly focuses on performative nature of gender identity, which may be appropriated in order to analyze identities in a broader sense. The theory of performativity, hence, is employed in this research in order to depict how identity of characters are formed and reformed through iteration of the behavior, or bodily acts, in postcolonial discourse, and to determine whether subversive acts are effects of power, disguised in new forms, or acts of resistant to power.

## 2. Performative Identity of Characters

Born and raised in Laxmangrah, a village along Gang River, Balram lives with his poor and extended family, under the regulation of his dictator granny, the ‘sly old Kusum’ (Adiga, 2008, p.11). Despite his eagerness to resume his education, he is forced to drop out of school and work, as a result of the loan taken from the landlord for providing his cousin-sister’s lavish dowry, since the landlord wants all the members of the family work for him (p. 23).

After his father’s death, he goes to Dhanbad and starts working as a chauffeur for Mr. Ashok, the Americanized son of his ex-landlord who is called back to India in order to solve tax problem regarding the family’s business. In Delhi, Balram kills his master and runs away with his money.

In this regard, Balram writes “even though I killed him, you won’t find me saying one bad thing about him. I protected his good name when I was his servant, and . . . I won’t stop protecting his good name. I owe him so much” (Adiga, 2008, p. 28). In his letters to Mr. Jiabao, Balram also confesses that “If you ask me to explain how one event connects to another, or how one motive strengthens or weakens the next . . . I will tell you that I myself don’t understand these things . . . I cannot be certain that I know exactly why Mr. Ashok died” (p. 67).

In her essay, “Exciting Tales of Exotic Dark India: Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*”, in relating Balram’s slaying of Ashok, Ana Cristina Mendes (2010) writes: “Somewhat *unaccountably*, Balram conspires to murder his . . . master” (p. 278, emphasis added); and in their attempt to answer the ambiguous nature of Balram’s behavior, Rahmat Setiawan and Ali Mustofa (2012) write: “[s]omething ‘awkward’ occurs . . . How can a religious one, a

coward one, a good servant, murder a good master?” (p. 2).

Then, there is a need to examine the reasons behind the actions in order to comprehend what happened to Balram and his master and to see why a good servant who won’t stop protecting his master’s good name should kill a ‘good master’ who was “always gentle . . . and kind to those around him, even his servants and driver” (Adiga, 2008, p. 27).

Back to his childhood, Balram writes how his father wished that at least one of his children live like a man: “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” (19). Balram further explains that for him living like a man meant being like Vijay: “What it meant to live like a man was a mystery. *I thought it meant being like Vijay, the bus conductor*” (Adiga, 2008, p. 19). According to Butler (2002), identity is assumed through a refusal of the loss of what one is forbidden from: “[t]he . . . denial [of loss] . . . results in melancholia . . . [which] operates through incorporation, then the disavowed . . . love is preserved” (p. 88) on the body. Then, the lack or desire to fulfill his father’s dream, that is to live like a man, is so strong in him that results in his identification with Vijay (then with Mr. Ashok too). In this regard, in their article “The Subaltern Cannot Speak: A Study of Adiga Arvinda’s *The White Tiger*”, Pourqoli and Puralifard (2017), elaborating on the point that Vijay was Balram’s first role model, write:

Thus, he [Balram] writes “I wanted to be like Vijay—with a uniform, a paycheck . . . and people looking at me with eyes that said, *How important he looks...*” (p. 20, original emphasis). Consequently, the desire, to be *like a man* and to look like *an important one*, which is produced in Balram is the very thing that Balram is, or thinks that he is forbidden from; since, as Lacan asserts “Desire and the unconscious are founded through the recognition of a fundamental lack” (Homer, 2005, p. 72). (p. 216)

Then, in the process of identification, the desire, lack, or what he is forbidden from, that is to live like a man (here to be like Vijay), is inscribed on Balram’s body, as he confesses “All I wanted was the chance to be a man...” (Adiga, 2008, p. 192), because according to Butler (2002) “[t]he phantasmatic nature of desire reveals the body not as its ground or cause, but as its

*occasion* and its *object*. The strategy of desire is in part the transfiguration of the desiring body itself” (p. 90). Or to put in Salih’s (2002) words, “you *are* what you have desired (and are no longer permitted to desire)” (p. 57).

Thus, Balram’s behavior, rather than being a cause of his own desire, is the effect of the desire (to be like a man); in other words, his behaviors and corporeal acts are a mere iteration of Vijay’s conduct, in order to get what he has desired, to live like a man, which since he is forbidden from, inscribes on his body. The same thing also happens in Ashok’s case which is aptly explained by Pourqoli and Poulalifard (2017):

Since “All desire arises from lack” (Evans, 2006, p. 12), in the process of his ego formation, by seeing Ashok as an ideal image of himself, Balram desires to be a (whole) man like Ashok, to be a master and thus, to have “a position which was ideologically and socially restricted for him” (Yadav, 2011, p. 5). Thus, he identifies with Ashok which leads to Ashok’s death and Balram’s usurpation of his money and identity: “Yes, Ashok! That’s what I call myself these days. Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur, settled in Bangalore” (Adiga, 2008, p.181). (p. 216)

Sometimes, this identification with Mr. Ashok goes to the extent that he writes, “[i]nside that sealed car, master and driver had somehow become one body that night” (Adiga, 2008, p.117). Thus, identification with master also generates a strong desire for an equal recognition in him, so that he writes “I wanted to run around shouting: “Balram is here too! Balram is here too” (p. 78)! But the fact is that, on the one hand, Ashok will not recognize him, since, as Ross (2002) explains, within Hegelian master/slave dialectic, “[t]he only recognition which the master will recognise or accept is that from an equal. [And] The recognition of the slave, falls short of this requirement since his subjection deprives him of the equality vital to a meaningful recognition” (A very Brief introduction to Lacan, para. 50). In this regard, in his article, “Queer Transgressions: Same-Sex Desire and Transgendered Representations in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*”, Fernando Sánchez (2012) also writes:

It is this constant negation of his body that causes him to want to shout “Balram is here too!” when he is walking around the President’s house listening to important men make important decisions (78). After leading a life of invisibility, he would like nothing

more than to relish in the fact that he can even come close to such prominent figures of India. And yet, what matters most to Balram is the absence of his master’s intimacy—the acknowledgement that “Balram is here” through words and actions. (p. 180)

On the other hand, according to Butler, in order to maintain this identification, Balram must adhere to performative patterns that reaffirm them which sometimes inevitably becomes impossible to maintain. In fact, there are always two conflicting societal norms: one, in which Ashok treats Balram as ‘a good member of family’, therefore, equal in worth; and the other, in which, Balram is defined as the ‘other’, and therefore, nothing. Indeed, the performative patterns that reaffirm the identification break down when his attempt to become one with his master is hindered by the view of him as the ‘other’: For instance, in giving an account of the sudden break of the intimate relationship between he and his master (while after Pinky’s departure Balram tries to console his master), he writes “The moment he [Mongoose] arrived, everything changed for me. The intimacy was over between me and Mr. Ashok. Once again, I was only the driver” (Adiga, 2008, p. 11). So, in depicting the scene of his ‘otherness’ Balram writes: “He [Ashok] lifted his hand—I *prepared for his touch*—but he wrapped it around the Mongoose’s shoulder . . . [declaring that] ‘I had nothing but this driver in front of me for five nights. Now at last I have *someone real* by my side: you” (p. 112).

These moments of failure in consistency of his identification with Ashok are so crucial in Balram’s final decision to put his plan into action and to kill his master that, right before the incident he writes “*I swear, I was ready to make a full confession right there...had he said the right word...had he touched my shoulder the right way*” (Adiga, 2008, p. 153, emphasis added). Another example of his disillusionment takes place when Pinky Madam, dead drunk, pretends she wants to run over Balram, so Balram writes: “Behind the wheel I saw Pinky Madam, grinning and howling, while Mr. Ashok, next to her, was smiling. Did I see a wrinkle of worry for my fate on his [Ashok’s] forehead—did I see his hand reach across and steady the steering wheel so that the car wouldn’t hit me? I like to think so” (Adiga, 2008, p. 96).

So, the very sense of ‘otherness’ is the main reason for Ashok’s death, brought



about through performative patterns of a White Tiger, in his attempt to fulfill his desire to be a *real man*. He identifies with Mr. Ashok, yet in Lacanian sense, he also recognizes Ashok's wholeness as a threat to his own sense of freedom and wholeness:

The anxiety provoked by this feeling of fragmentation fuels the identification with the specular image [ideal image] by which the ego is formed. However, the anticipation of a synthetic ego is henceforth constantly threatened by the memory of this sense of fragmentation, which manifests itself in 'images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, [and] bursting open of the body' which haunt the human imagination. (As cited in Evans, 2006, p. 11)

Thus, as Ross (2002) explains, "Part of the . . . desire . . . is . . . an aggressive tendency to become that image by consuming it, by emptying its content into himself or herself; i.e. by mastering it" (A very Brief introduction to Lacan, para. 15), which, as it was mentioned in Ashok's case leads to his death, and Balram's usurpation of his money and identity: "Yes, Ashok! That's what I call myself these days. Ashok Sharma, North Indian entrepreneur, settled in Bangalore" (Adiga, 2008, p. 181). Therefore, if Balram's behavior is a mere repetition of what he believes to be like a man, an entrepreneur, then, in order to depict its performativity, there is a need to take a close look at Vijay's, and then Ashok's conducts, as well. This investigation is necessary as according to Butler what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts" (Butler, 2002, p. xiv).

In continuation of giving an account of what, Vijay, the Bus conductor has done in his life, Balram writes: "each time you saw him he had done better for himself" (Adiga, 2008, p.58). Balram also describes how, Vijay had changed into a business man which can also explain his own desire to be a business man and run his own taxi service too: "My heart began to pound. The man on the right was my childhood hero—Vijay, the pigherd's son turned bus conductor turned politician from Laxmangarh. He had changed uniforms again: now he was wearing the polished suit and tie of a modern Indian businessman" (Adiga, 2008, p. 163).

Then, during an election in the village, Balram depicts Vijay's conducts. He

narrates how, when one of his father's colleagues (a small dark-skinned man) tries to disobey and subvert the unwritten laws of his society, that is, by his attempt to cast his own vote, he is severely punished: Vijay and a policeman beat him with their sticks till his body stops wriggling and fighting back (p. 60), an act with the Butlerian explanation that "[a]s a strategy of survival within compulsory systems . . . we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender [or performance expected by society] right" (Butler, 2002, p.190). And here, it is better to remind that Vijay, not only is Balram's childhood hero, but also as he confesses the first entrepreneur he knew of (p. 19). For Balram, then, Vijay's 'corporeal style', or 'sequence of acts', is a 'strategy' which has cultural survival as its end (Salih, 2002, p. 66). Simply put, Vijay is a role model for his behavior as a man, an entrepreneur, in order to succeed in a society in which, as he writes: "[e]veryone who counts in this world . . . has killed someone or other on their way to the top . . . Kill enough people and they will put up bronze statues to you near Parliament House in Delhi—but that is . . . not what I am after. *All I wanted wasthe chance to be a man—and for that, one murder was enough*" (Adiga, 2008, p. 192, emphasis added).

Therefore, these very sentences are irrefutable evidence for performative nature of his behavior—in order *to be counted, to be a man* in the way that conforms to societal norms and expectations. Thus, on the way to success, his performance does not disrupt binary oppositions of thought in the society. Then, rather than an act of agency or subversion of the system, his performance only works to "[r]eidealize . . . [the] norms *without* calling them into question" (Butler, 2011, p. 176). Therefore, he reinforces master/servant dialect and class distinctions. Since, as Butler asserts only "certain kinds of . . . repetitions [which are] effectively disruptive, truly troubling . . . [the] cultural hegemony" (Butler, 2002, p. 189) can be called subversive. Then, up to now, there is no agency, and therefore, no rebellious act against the norms of society, hence, he himself becomes a prey of the regularity norms with which he wants to break.

The other example of his performative acts occurs, after killing Ashok, when he tries to establish his own business, a taxi service. He explains that calling all offices in Bangalore the only thing he hears is that: "You're too late. Every business in

Bangalore already has a taxi service to pick up and drop off their employees at night” (Adiga, 2008, p. 180). Then, asking himself “*What would Mr. Ashok do?*” (p. 180), he writes,

The next day I ... went to the nearest police station. In my hand I had the red bag. I acted like an important man . . . Then I insisted on seeing the big man there, the inspector . . . the red bag had done the trick . . . Two days later, I called up the nice woman at the Internet company who had turned me down, and heard a shocking tale. Her taxi service had been disrupted. A police raid had discovered that most of the drivers did not have licenses . . . And that was how I got my own—as they say in English—“start-up.” (pp. 180-181)

This passage, in which he pretends to be, and acts as ‘an important man’—with a ‘red bag’ in his hand, bribing the authority to get the doors open—is a reminder of the same behavior performed by Ashok and his family. It does not end there, and when one of his employees runs over a young man and kills him, again by buying off the police officers he saves his company’s fame. Then, he peacefully writes: “The police have let me off. That is the way of this jungle we live in” (Adiga, 2008, p. 188).

One may argue that, though he bribes the police, the same as Stork did in Pinky’s case, he shows agency by trying to amend his deeds, that is, by trying to pay the young man’s family, and hiring his brother in his company, and also, in the way he treats his employees. Then, we need to go back to the scene in which, Pinky Madam, runs over a child and Balram is asked to take the responsibility on himself, by signing a false confession—here it is important to emphasize that, even in such an important event of his life, not only he ignores the child and just tries to act in a way that suits his masters, as ‘loyal as a dog’, but also, he does not object not to sign and save himself—However, after bribing the police, there remains no need for Balram’s help. Then, Stork tells Ashok: “She’s gone crazy, that woman [Pinky]. Wanting to *find the family of the child and give them compensation*” (Adiga, 2008, p. 106, emphasis added). Thus, the only difference between Pinky and Balram is that, what *she* wishes to do, he easily does.

Balram also writes that when Pinky abandoned Ashok for good, “at the airport, she pushed *a brown envelope* into my window...” (p. 107, emphasis added). Therefore, similar to Pinky who, rather than

resisting to Ashok’s family’s attempt to put the blame on Balram, simply tries to amend the situation by giving money, Balram also does so. Thus, he simply declares that “I put *the brown envelope* on the table [of the dead man’s family]” (p. 188, emphasis added).

Then, though there might be some truth in the claim of agency, despite Balram’s own claim that “[I] had to do something different . . . I can’t live the way the Wild Boar and the Buffalo and the Raven lived...” (Adiga, 2008, p. 188), the fact is that, he does nothing extraordinary. What he does is only a simple repetition of hybrid performative patterns. That is to say, he has acquired a hybrid identity through his close contact with his Americanized masters with different cultural backgrounds; he himself acknowledges this point by saying that, “[b]y eavesdropping on them [Ashok and Pinky], I learned a lot about life . . . Many of my best ideas are, in fact, borrowed from my ex-employer or his brother . . . I confess, Mr. Premier: I am not an original thinker . . .” (Adiga, 2008, p. 28).

Yet, despite all those foregoing discussions, one might still insist that Balram’s agency and free will is fairly evident, in his dream to establish an English school for the poor kids: “After three or four years . . . I think I might . . . start a school—an English-language school—for poor children in Bangalore. A school where you won’t be allowed to corrupt anyone’s head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi—nothing but the facts of life for these kids. A school full of White Tigers...” (Adiga, 2008, p. 192).

From the very beginning, Balram raises the issue of the language, by declaring that “Neither you nor I speak English, but there are some things that can be said only in English” (p. 3). This coincides with “Butler’s argument that there is no identity outside language” (Salih, 2002, p. 64), indicating the importance of language not only in the construction of one’s identity but also, in giving one, the voice and chance of agency. So, Balram’s statement, “can be said *only* in English”, can be considered a mark of the influence of English language on his identity. In other words, it is a sign of his hybridity, on the one hand, and his obligation to obey the norms as *the sine qua non* of the discourse in which he is constructed, on the other hand. In this regard, in her essay “The Poetics and Politics of Cultural Studies in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*”, Lily Want (2011) also stressed that the novel does not



challenge the paradigms and intellectual premises of Western thought: “Through Balram’s adoption of a distinct social behaviour, *he . . . participates* in the processes by which existing institutions and structures of power are produced. In other words, there is no attempt to alter the existing categories and systems of thought even as he dialectically represents and reinforces class conflict and class distinction” (p. 9).

In their article, “The Cultural Dominance of West in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*”, Wani and Singh (2015), by referring to Educational policies of India, write: “Education system of India is still a tool in the hands of the colonizers. For example, we are still following masters like lord Macaulay’s minutes related to the medium of imparting education in India” (p. 1165). Therefore, they believe:

Thoughts and ideologies are still imparted through the languages of west . . . It is the language that the west has been using in the race of imperialistic rule to govern and impoverish the subordinate nations from their cultures. They have seeped in their culture and lifestyle in many of the eastern countries through English language. They themselves gave the status of ‘international language’ to English. By and large it is the strategy of the European world to govern the rest of nations. Every nation is forced to keep English language as part of the curriculum in their education system thus; the West gets every opportunity to get into the minds of the young learners. (p. 1166)

In this regard, Ngugi (n. d.) also writes “[where] the bullet was the means of the physical subjugation. Language was the means of the spiritual subjugation then I went to school, a colonial school, and the language of my education was no longer the language of my culture” (as cited in Wani & Singh, 2015, p. 1166). Hence, arguably, the West uses language as a tool to manipulate people in the East as well as their beliefs, sense of beauty, ethics, etc. In this vein, Foucault also asserts that “any system of education is a political way of maintaining . . . of discourses, along with the knowledge and powers which they carry” (as cited in Mills, 2003, p. 61). Therefore, Balram’s wish to start a new school in English, “*where you won't be allowed to corrupt anyone's head with prayers and stories about God or Gandhi*” (p. 192, emphasis added), rather than being taken as a sign of

agency, should be thought as a sign of his being colonized, in the process of producing, as Macaulay puts it, “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (as cited in Bhabha, 1994, p. 87).

In this regard, even his rejection of a marriage proposal, rather than an act of agency, can be viewed as a hybrid act, under the influence of a foreign culture through language. On this subject, once more, Wani and Singh’s (2015) views can be illuminating when they affirm that the influence of Western languages, sense of dressing, and Western life style is the most pivotal issue with regard to the cultural degradation of traditional values of the Indian society, resulting in the Western dominance of the Indians’ minds (p. 1161). Therefore, rather than marrying an Indian girl, Balram prefers and “wants to sleep with blonde and drink English wine which rich people do” (Yadav, 2008, p. 6). So, as Adiga (n.d.) acknowledges “The New Morality that his [Balram’s] compatriots have embraced is soon grasped with both hands by the man from the darkness who thought that he had seen the light” (as cited in Yadav, 2011, p. 6). Thus, one can assert, with some degrees of certainty, that in a postcolonial society under the influence of his masters, Balram’s behavior and identity is a mere hybrid-performativity.

### **3. Failures in Performing Identities**

#### **3.1. Class identity**

The rest of the study focuses on the failures in fulfilling societal expectations of some other characters of the novel, including Ashok, Pinky and Kusum; however, more space will be dedicated to Ashok and his bodily acts. The case of Ashok can especially serve as a complement to our understanding of the performative identity of Balram since, in narrating the tale of his corruption “from a sweet, innocent village fool into a citified fellow full of debauchery, depravity, and wickedness” (Adiga, 2008, p.116), which also depicts performative nature of his identity, Balram writes: “All these changes happened in me because they happened first in Mr. Ashok. He returned from America an innocent man, but life in Delhi corrupted him—and once the master of the Honda City becomes corrupted, how can the driver stay innocent” (p. 116)?

In comparing his ex-landlord’s sons with each other, Balram writes that they were as different from each other as night and day: While Mukesh—called Mongoose

back at home—was small, dark, ugly, and very shrewd; Ashok was tall, broad, and handsome, like a landlord's son should be, but it was Mongoose who had his father's mind as a master should (Adiga, 2008, p. 45).

Ashok's getting a foreign education and being married to a woman, Pinky Madam, out of his caste and religion, are issues that make Balram believe that Ashok lacked, what he calls 'the usual instincts that run in the blood of a landlord' (p. 83). And being a vegetarian, even his appetite was not qualified for a landlord's and master's; even his uncle, the Wild Boar (also a landlord), remarks "I've never heard of a landlord who was vegetarian . . . It's not natural", and he continues to say "You're a landlord. It's the Brahmins who are vegetarian, not us" (p. 50).

Balram also explains that, unlike his family who treated servants like animals, Ashok was always gentle and kind to all those around him, even his servants and driver. And this kindness and his trust on his servants, specially his driver, was the very thing that he was—explicitly and implicitly—endlessly warned against: "You'll have to check up on the driver" (p. 82), or "You shouldn't be so trusting, Ashok. Delhi drivers are all rotten" (p. 125). The constant warnings and Ashok's indifference to them are so frequent that even make Balram to comment: "I realized that this . . . handsome, foreign-educated man, who would be my only master in a few minutes . . . was weak, helpless, absentminded, and completely unprotected by the usual instincts that run in the blood of a landlord. *If you were back in Laxmangarh, we would have called you the Lamb*" (p. 83, original emphasis).

Thus, not only he lacks the usual instincts of a master, but also his behavior and bodily acts are not qualified for a master. Nonetheless, since, according to Butler, identity is a production of stylized repetition of acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame, as soon as Ashok's performative patterns change, the outcome is a new identity in him. So, when Ashok chastises Balram for donating a rupee to a beggar, it makes Balram to conclude: "[i]t struck me that there really was no difference between the two of them [Ashok and Mongoose]. They were both their father's seed" (Adiga, 2008, p. 144).

Traditionally, each class has some predetermined roles that should be fulfilled by the members of each class. Thus, under

the regulating forces, Ashok is constantly forced to repeat the performative patterns of a master which "congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 2002, p. 46). This issue can explain Balram's referring to Ashok as a "Lamb-that-was-born-from-the-loins-of-a-landlord" (Adiga, 2008, p. 91). One instance of such regulating forces is Ashok's family, whose force upon him is vivid in the following passage. Balram explains how, while going to Delhi, in the midway, Ashok sat behind the steers and then he became driver and I became passenger. A scene worth being quoted in length:

He [Ashok] started the car.

The Mongoose, who had been reading a newspaper the whole time, now saw what had happened. "Don't do this, Ashok." He was an old-school master, the Mongoose. *He knew right from wrong.*

"You're right—this feels weird," Mr. Ashok said.

The car came to a stop . . . I was again the driver and servant, and Mr. Ashok was again the passenger and master. (p. 67)

Thus, as an 'old-school master' who knows right from wrong, Mongoose is the one with a master's mind who regulates Ashok's behavior. In fact, the effect of these regulating forces is so intense that, when Ashok begins to interrogate Balram—about where he goes and what he does—it makes Balram wonder "[y]ou have never before asked me where I was going when I left the house. *What has Ms. Uma done to you*" (p. 165, original emphasis)?

The performative nature of Ashok's identity is even sharper in the scene of accident. The change in patterns has altered him from a kind master—who according to Balram, had returned from America as an innocent man (p. 116)—into a corrupted master. So, in spite of Pinky's struggle, he refuses to take the hit-child to a hospital. Also, he remains silent while Balram is forced to take the guilt upon himself. Thus, it is in the presence of such regulating forces of the society—as his family members or his friend—that he is forced to act in accordance with the expectations which consequently affect his identity. In fact, Ashok himself acknowledges: "My way of living is all wrong, Balram. I know it, but I don't have the courage to change it. I just don't have...the *balls* . . . I let people exploit me, Balram. I've never done what I've wanted, my whole life" (Adiga, 2008, p. 141).

Therefore, wherever Ashok goes, he always assumes a passive personality,



yielding to what destiny unfolds for him. He represses his own desires and personal wills in favor of what society wants and expects him to do. Nonetheless, the effect of these regulating forces though strong, whenever vanished (since his family is not always by his side), results in his return to ex-performative patterns, producing an ambiguous and twofold identity in him. This process is crystal-clear in the following remarks where, objecting the change in his behavior, his girlfriend says “I wonder if you *have* changed, Ashok. The first call from Dhanbad, and you're back to your old self” (Adiga, 2008, p.125). And in another occasion, Balram writes “The moment his brother left, he changed. He began wearing a black shirt with the top button open, and changed his perfume” (p. 116). Thus, the constant failure in fulfilling the expectations and perfectly performing his role as a master leads to his death and Balram’s rise in the status. As Balram also acknowledges “I think the Rooster Coop needs people like me to break out of it. *It needs masters like Mr. Ashok—who . . . was not much of a master—to be weeded out*, and exceptional servants like me to replace them” (p. 193, emphasis added).

Indeed, as Balram concisely puts it, Ashok’s failure to assume his new role as a master opens a space for Balram to break with his old patterns as a servant and to assume the new role as a *white tiger*—the phrase by which once he was hailed by the school spectator and for the performative patterns of which there was no chance to take place until that moment. Here, we notice an instance of interpellation as for Butler, “interpellation is a performative utterance, i.e. it constitutes the subject in the act of naming her or him” (Salih, 2002, p.106). Accordingly, in *Excitable Speech*, Butler argues that,

[t]he linguistic constitution of the subject may take place without the subject’s even registering the operation of interpellation. So the law might call me and I might not hear, but the name by which I am called and of which I am ignorant will still constitute my social identity as a subject. On the other hand, I might refuse the name by which I am called, but according to Butler the name will nonetheless still continue to force itself upon me. (as cited in Salih, 2002, p.106)

So, whether Balram notices or not, the call nonetheless, continues to force itself upon him, constituting him as a White Tiger,

an entrepreneur. This is also the main reason for his rise rather than any act of subversion of the norms. While Balram wants to be like Ashok, even eating what he eats, so does Ashok. On one occasion Ashok declares: “I’m sick of the food I eat, Balram. I’m sick of the life I lead. We rich people, we’ve lost our way, Balram. I want to be a simple man like you, Balram” (Adiga, 2008, p. 142); in other words, he expresses his wish to be like Balram. Then, all these only lead to a simple replacement between them, without either of them achieving agency or subverting the underlying structures of society. Thus, the fact is that, in such a ‘eat—or get eaten up’ society which Balram talks about, as Ashok fails to grasp his role as a master, Balram seizes the opportunity, and new patterns begin to develop for Balram in order to ensure his survival, since, now as a white tiger, he has the power to overturn the lamb.

### 3.2. Gender Identities

Ashok’s failure in performing his identity is not exclusively confined to his failure to grasp the class distinctions and perform his role as a master. He also fails to perform his gender identity. Though, there is neither any explicit description of women, nor any prominent female character in the novel, *The White Tiger*, there is enough significant information by and from which, one can easily evaluate the dominant gender patterns in the society depicted by Adiga. From the very beginning, in the first scene in which Balram depicts the lives of the women of his society, there is the struggle of his mother’s dead body with fire and mud. In illustrating the scene, in which, as a representative figure of patriarchal norms his grandmother, Kusum, shoves his mother’s foot into the fire and the foot resist being burned, Balram writes: “My mother wasn’t going to let them destroy her. . . . She was trying to fight the black mud; her toes were flexed and resisting; but the mud was sucking her in, sucking her in . . .” (Adiga, 2008, p. 12). This scene, as a vivid portent for the end of any female struggle, even after her death, indicates difficulties of achieving agency for women in a male centered patriarchal society. Hence, in the society that Balram depicts, due to people’s being confined in defined gender roles, as Sánchez (2012) states, “[Ashok’s] Americanization leads to his feminized portrayal and, ultimately, his death” (p. 176).

However, by interrogating the validity of the identity categories as stable and self-

evident entities, Butler not only depicts performative nature of gender identities, but also by calling their validity into question, displaces masculinity from its unproblematic position. If gender categories are not stable and innate but socially constructed, as Simone de Beauvoir in her celebrated sentence points out, “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (as cited in Butler, 2002, p. 12), then, characteristics of masculinity and femininity are not exclusively confined to one, and can be appropriated by either sex, which is very evident in Ashok and Pinky’s behavior, about whom Sánchez (2012) aptly writes,

“Pinky’s “unfeelingness” and lack of conscience in India create a dissonance with her female body (which is “supposed” to carry with it the traits of nurturance and caring). Juxtaposed with that is Ashok’s male body which is associated with passivity. These feminine traits are directly the result of his time in America. Crossing national and cultural borders seems to create a transgendered experience for the two. In the end, Pinky’s successful escape indicates that masculinity can successfully fluctuate between these two spaces while Ashok’s death signals that femininity is antithetical to and cannot survive in neoliberal India.” (p. 12)

Though Sánchez’s assertion of the exchange of masculine traits truly shows that, being feminized, one’s survival is almost impossible in a patriarchal society, yet, from this assertion it should not be inferred that by acquiring masculine characteristics and undermining the norms, a female can survive a patriarchal society. In this regard, Jadhav (2014) also states:

“Feminists may be happy with the female characters in *The White Tiger* that Pinky and Balram’s Grandmother have their own set of rules and life styles. They do not compromise their values and livings for anything. One [sic] the one hand Pinky leaves Mr. Ashok in search of her own life and on the other hand Kusum, Balram’s Granny dominates her family”. (p. 5)

But, the fact is that there is really nothing to be happy about as in Pinky’s case, she is locked in the performative patterns defined for her gender. In the new society in which she arrives, she is only defined through her husband and their marriage represents a traditional view of marital institution where the man provides wealth and descent, and the woman, statuesque and company. Thus, being Americanized, both, Ashok, as a caring,

gentle, and “a good husband, always coming up with plans to make her [wife] happy” (p. 90), and Pinky, as an indifferent, remote, and intractable woman—who does manly deeds such as wearing pants and swearing—fail in complying with suitable performative patterns ascribed for their gender; since now, living in India, they are required to conform to Indian culture and follow certain codes of conducts. Hence, while this failure leads to one’s “feminized portrayal and, ultimately, his death” (Sánchez, 2012, p. 1), and the other’s alienation and exclusion, it also leads to disintegration of their matrimony as we regularly punish those who fail to act their gender right. Consequently, Pinky’s *successful escape*, rather than being viewed as an act of agency on her part, should be taken as a sign of her passivity and failure to redefine and reshape the gender role for her sex and therefore, to conform to her new patterns and societal expectations.

In Kusum’s case, though she almost manages to re-shape her identity and break free from her traditional gender role as a submissive and obedient woman, being female, she finally fails, and is punished for her attempt to gain control over men—especially over Balram who writes “I did not want to obey Kusum. She was blackmailing me” (Adiga, 2008, p. 114)—which is socially seen as a rebellious act, in which, she tries to change her gender role in undesired directions. Since, according to Butler (2011), in the process of interpellation of an infant as a ‘she’ or a ‘he’, “[t]he girl is ‘girded’, brought into the domain of language and kinship . . . [which] is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of a norm” (p. xvii); therefore, taking her position in the society as a woman, Kusum is “compelled to ‘cite’ the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject” (Adiga, 2008, p. 177).

Then, in the process of being named ‘munna’, meaning ‘boy’, which comes even before any other interpellation on him (such as subaltern and *White Tiger*), taking his position as a man, Balram also is compelled to ‘cite’ the norms as well, in order to remain a viable and qualified subject. However, in contrast to women, the call puts him in a privileged position, in a male dominated patriarchal society. Thus, while Balram is almost left untouched for his attempt to change his identity and get the power, Ashok is punished for portraying feminine characteristics. Also, being female, Kusum is severely punished for stepping out of her place. Then, in a male dominant



society, it makes a big difference to be male or female in one's struggle to achieve agency, even in uncontroversial aspects of identity. This issue is in accordance with the underlying structures of society as, in patriarchal societies, women are always in a marginalized position, which leads to their financial dependency on men, and thereby, their exploitation. In this sense, Ramteke (2013) writes: "Through the character of Balram, the novelist tried to show that the poor is always being exploited because of their weak financial strength" (as cited in Choudhury, 2014, p. 4). This is also true about women, since according to Butler (2002), the gender reality which is created through sustained social performances makes it difficult for women to move outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination (p. 180).

Then, it seems that there is a close and parallel relationship between the lack of any prominent female figure in the novel, and the status of women in the society. While there is not enough information about female characters in the novel, the only depiction of women Balram makes, is either as sexual objects (prostitute) or as housemaids (doing house chores, taking care of family members). Thus, in contrast to men, women have less power to exercise their volition, which is very apparent in Pinky's wish to help the dead ones' families. Consequently, while as a woman, being called crazy, Pinky is prohibited to do so, Balram as a man, easily does it. Or, while both Kusum and Balram act in accordance with societal norms to get the power in their hands, confined in performative patterns for women, at the end Kusum is punished for attempting to gain control over men (especially Balram) and occupy a male chair! Then, both Kusum and Pinky's fates depict the unattainability of agency for women, even in accordance with the norms of society or in noncontroversial aspects of identity. So, while both men and women are forced to cite the gender norms of a society, on the account of their femininity and their financial dependency on men, women are even more restricted, and therefore, experience a 'double displacement', because as Spivak (1988) writes "clearly, if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways" (p. 90).

#### 4. Sum Up

The novel, the *White Tiger*, in the light of Judith Butler's theory of performativity depicts that identities are not stable and

innate; they are rather artificial and constructed through performative patterns. In other words, the regulatory forces, reiteratively and citationally, work to shape and reshape the subjectivity and identity of characters whenever there is a disruption or failure in the patterns. By itself, this may lead to the development of new patterns and open up a chance for agency. So, while the novel features examples of the change in performative patterns and therefore identities, it also depicts that characters can rarely break from the regulatory norms of society, and if there is any break, it is severely punished. The procedure, consequently, highlights the fact that while new performative patterns lead to reconstruction of identity, these changes rarely entail agency.

In the process of reshaping his identity, Balram's lacks or desires become inseparable from the regulatory norms of society that he tries to oppose. For him, then, neither his attempt to become one with Ashok nor his breaking with his old patterns are examples of agency as the change in his identity is always governed by societal norms and hence remains in control of outside regulators. Thus the study concludes that only uncontroversial aspects of identity are reformed as a result of performative patterns instigated by characters' own volition, and any act of resistance or nonperforming which contradicts the norms is doomed to failure or leads to punishment (Ashok and Kusum) and exclusion (Pinky).

Thus, both Ashok and Balram exemplify that when identities change, the individual is not necessarily in control of these changes. While Balram, by adapting himself to the norms of the society, becomes unwittingly a prey of the regulatory norms with which he tries to break, by failing to adapt himself to the regulatory norms of the patriarchal society, Ashok is severely punished. Thus, his death, on the one hand, signals the necessity of sticking to one's role defined by regulating norms of the society, and on the other hand, his feminized portrayal in the novel, doubly demonstrates the difficulties of achieving agency for women.

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